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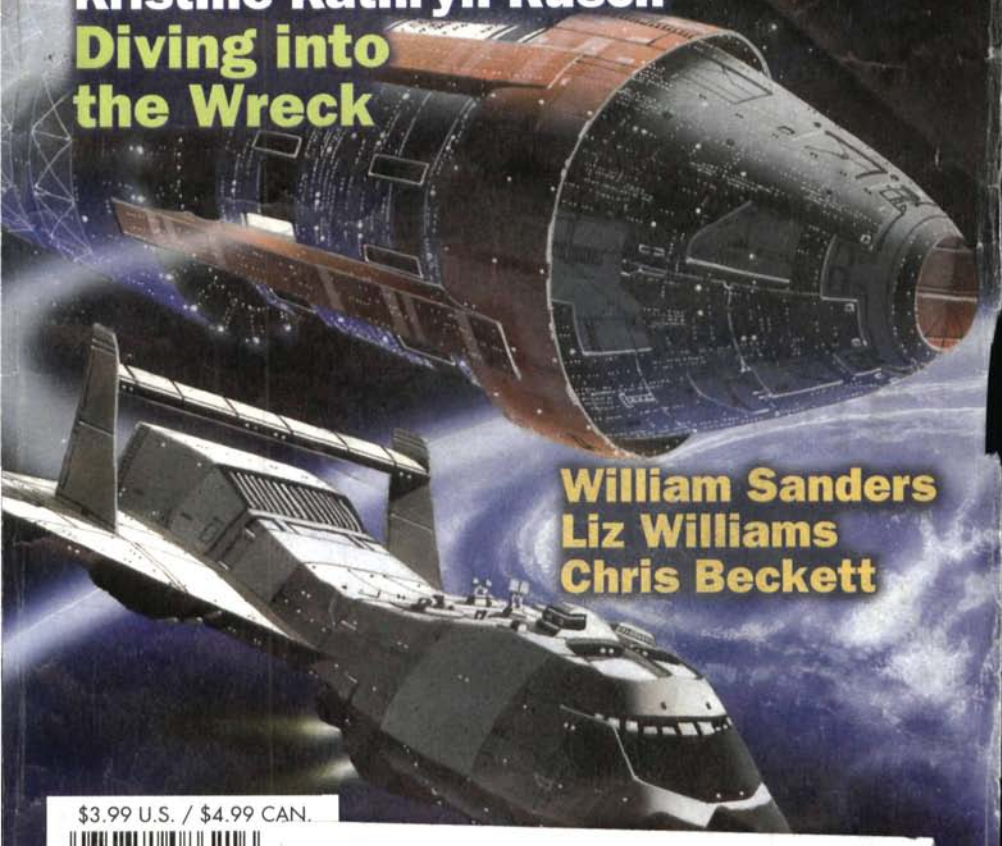

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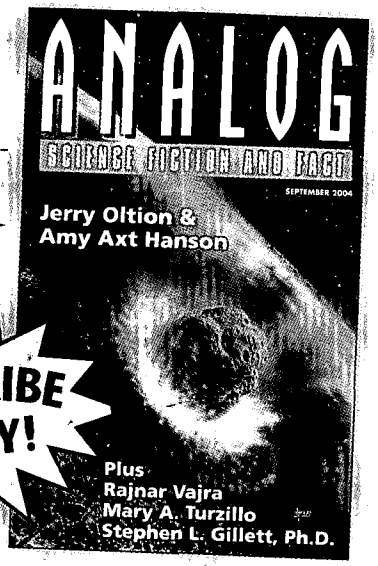

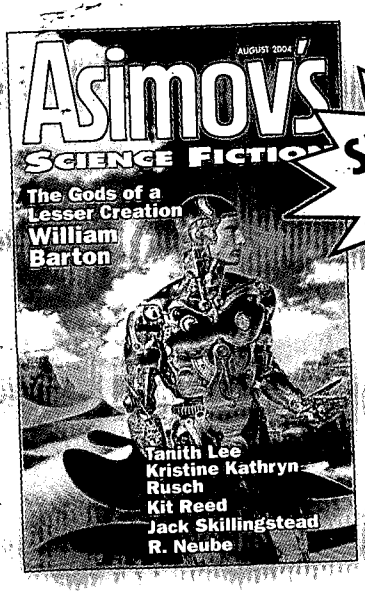

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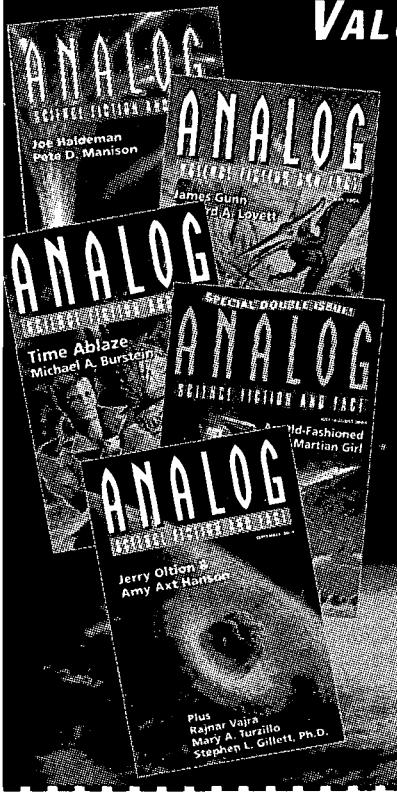

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Asimov's Science Fiction

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Vol. 29 No. 12 (Whole Number 359)
Next Issue on Sale November 15, 2005

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Asimov's Science Fiction. ISSN 1065-2698. Vol. 29, No. 12. Whole No. 359, December 2005. GST #R123293128. Published monthly except for two combined double issues in April/May and October/November by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription $43.90 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $53.90 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction,* 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications.

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Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction,* 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Quebecor St. Jean, 800 Blvd. Industrial, St. Jean, Quebec J3B 8G4.

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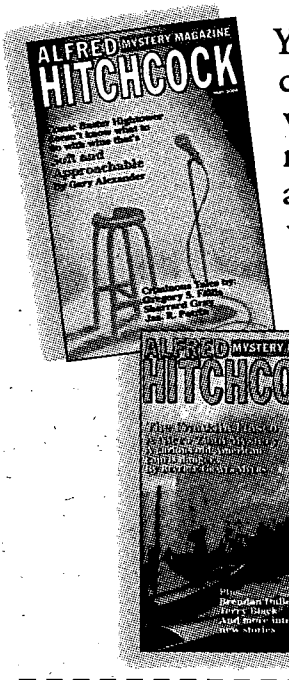

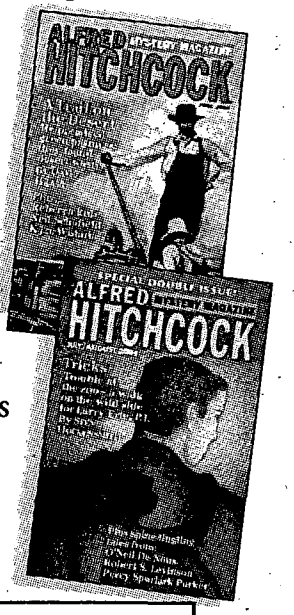

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EDITORIAL

by Sheila Williams

WRITING WORKSHOPS

It was while reading Harlan Ellison's *Again, Dangerous Visions* as a shy teenager that I first encountered the concept of a writers' workshop. Harlan was referring to the Clarion Writers' Workshop, founded by Robin Scott Wilson in 1968. Clarion seemed almost mythical to me. Over six weeks, a group of unpublished authors (with far more confidence than I had in 1975!) could have their fiction pummeled by each other as well as by a tag-team of respected science fiction writers. The workshop began at Clarion State College (now Clarion University) in Pennsylvania, but has long since moved to East Lansing, Michigan.

In the thirty-seven years since Clarion was established, it has been joined by several other prestigious workshops. One of these, Odyssey: The Fantasy Writing Workshop, was founded by Jeanne Cavelos in 1996. It is held each summer in Manchester, New Hampshire. This past July, I had the honor of attending both workshops as the guest editor.

I found the opportunity to attend these workshops exciting, because both workshops gave me the chance to do something I don't get to do in the office—meet and critique stories with new authors. I am always impressed by the level of energy, enthusiasm, and dedication I find in the unsolicited manuscript submissions (better known as the "slush pile") that show up at our office. Unfortunately, the volume of submissions is so heavy that I can't respond personally to each author and still meet my publishing deadlines. In fact, I often don't have time to read the entire story. If a tale doesn't grab my attention quickly, I probably won't get to the end of it. While most of the authors who submit stories to *Asimov's* get form rejection letters, even the personal letters that I do write are necessarily terse. Only a very few rejection letters contain suggested story revisions. Before attending Clarion, however, I read a story by each of the students. At the workshop, I read at least two more stories by each student.

Although I had been to some three-hour workshop sessions at various World Science Fiction Conventions, the 2005 Clarion was my introduction to live-in workshopping. I said good-bye to my husband and kids on Wednesday, July 6, and flew off to Michigan. I was to be the Editor-in-Residence for one week. I tend to be chicken when it comes to flying, so Clarion had graciously agreed to fly me to Detroit. I was met at the airport by the delightful Catherine Shaffer, a science author and Clarion grad who has published both science and science fiction pieces in *Analog*. We'd met a couple of years earlier when one of Catherine's essays received the AnLab Readers' Award for the Best Science Fact article of 2003. Visiting with Catherine made the hour and a half drive to East Lansing speed by.

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'he students at Clarion work h six professional authors and editor. Most of the authors lead 'eek of writing and critiquing sions. The last two authors are led the anchors. They teach to- her for a two-week session. The st three authors at this year's rion were Joan D. Vinge, Charles leman Finlay, and Gwyneth ies. My own session began dur- the fourth week with the ener- ic Cory Doctorow. I've been ding Cory since he was a final- for the Dell Magazines Award best SF or fantasy story by a lege student. I discovered at rion that in addition to his fic- n, the Clarion students were te familiar with *The Complete ot's Guide to Publishing Science tion*—a book Cory co-authored h Karl Schroeder.

'hat first evening, I spent some ie unwinding with Cory and herine and the students. Later, ent to my room to read the sto- s that would be critiqued the xt morning and to check my ail. I had a letter from my sister an, letting me know that she, , had just arrived safely at her tination. Her convoy had made rom Kuwait to Baghdad, and was about to begin her year- g tour of duty in Iraq. I knew it we would both be in for the g haul, but my minefields would metaphorical and my tour uld be shorter.

'he workshop began at nine the t morning with a lecture on In- net rights by Cory, and then the 's stories were critiqued by all. e next day, I explained the sub- ssion process at *Asimov's* and sort of things I'm looking for in ries. One of my props was a sto- that had recently sold to the magazine. It was a tale that I had worked on with the author, a graduate of Clarion West. He had given me permission to show the students the original story along with the first and second revisions. After that, the daily critiquing session began. In addition, I began to hold individual meetings with the students (as do all the authors who teach at Clarion). Throughout my week, I was impressed by the students' group critiques. They managed to be respectful, even gentle at times, while delivering spot-on and helpful criticism. A number of the students appeared to be talented, and all of them had interesting things to say. All of the students seemed prepared to learn and grow from Clarion.

On Thursday night, Cory's new book, *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town* (Tor), was launched at Shueler's—a local bookstore. On Friday evening, the students had an extra treat. Well-known horror author, Kathe Koja, drove out to Clarion to visit her old pal Cory, and to give a talk about her successful new career as a Young Adult author. Cory left later that weekend, and we were joined by two Nebula-Award-winning authors—Leslie What and Walter Jon Williams—the anchor team. The students wrote at a ferocious pace, and turned in a flurry of stories on Sunday and Monday. Leslie and Walter alternated with talks about writing on Monday and Tuesday and we all critiqued stories. Like Cory, Walter and Leslie provided the students with thoughtful and probing comments on their stories. Tuesday night, Leslie, Walter, and I participated in a panel discussion at the local Barnes & Noble. On Wednesday morning, I gave a talk

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on the art of the first paragraph—that one and only shot most unknown writers have to grab the editor's attention. Walter followed with a talk on rights. I had to miss his lecture, though, because I was now on my way to Detroit and my flight back to New York.

I managed to return to the office for two days, spent the weekend reminding my children that they really did have a mother, and then I was off by train to the Odyssey workshop in New Hampshire. Although the Odyssey workshop also lasts six weeks, the experience is a bit different from Clarion.

Instead of having a different writer lead each week, the workshop is taught by Jeanne Cavelos, an experienced editor, writer, and teacher. Jeanne brings in guest authors and editors. This year the guests included Elizabeth Hand, P.D. Cacek, Allen M. Steele, and James Morrow. Melanie Tem and Steve Rasnic Tem were also there for a week long Writer-in-Residence program.

At Odyssey, I didn't overlap with any of the other professional guests. I read four stories before attending the workshop. Monday night, Jeanne held a reception, which gave me an opportunity to meet the students and answer some questions. That night, I read the three stories that would be workshopped the next day. The following morning I compressed most of what I'd had to say at Clarion into a two-and-a-half-hour lecture. The lecture was followed by the group workshopping session. Once again, I was struck by the students' insights and suggestions. I was also impressed with Jeanne's ability to take apart a story and offer constructive criticism without inflicting permanent injury to the student. Later that afternoon, I had individual meetings with the students who had authored the first four stories.

After a long, but rewarding, day, James Patrick Kelly—SF author and columnist-extraordinaire—picked me up and took me back to his house for an evening of swimming, a cookout, and a boat ride with him and his wife, Pam. It was a lovely way to end an intensive couple of weeks.

Although I was brought in to teach, I learned a number of things at both workshops. Watching Cory, Leslie, Walter, and Jeanne gave me ideas on how to improve my own teaching skills. Listening to the students gave me insights into their questions and into their commitment to writing. They may not all end up with professional sales, but they will all improve their writing skills and grow from the workshop experience. I realized that to survive the workshop, your epidermis doesn't really have to be all that tough; as long as you remember that it really is the story, not the author, which is being critiqued. Each story is a work of art, just like a clay pot or a piece of jewelry. The artist can take the lessons learned from a good critique and use them to improve the work—or make the next one better. I was thrilled to attend these workshops as a teacher, but maybe if I'd understood this concept as a teenager, even I could have survived a Clarion or an Odyssey as a student.

You can contact Clarion at *clarion@msu.edu*, Clarion West (another well-known workshop) can be contacted at *info@clarionwest.org*. Odyssey can be reached via *www.sff.net/odyssey*. ○

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

LOVECRAFT AS SCIENCE FICTION

I've been re-reading lately a story that I first encountered some time late in 1947, when I was twelve years old, in Donald A. Wollheim's marvelous anthology *Portable Novels of Science*: H.P. Lovecraft's novella "The Shadow out of Time." As I've said elsewhere more than once, reading that story changed my life. I've come upon it now in an interesting new edition and want to talk about it again.

The Wollheim book contained four short SF novels: H.G. Wells' "The First Men in the Moon," John Taine's "Before the Dawn," Olaf Stapledon's "Odd John," and the Lovecraft story. Each, in its way, contributed to the shaping of the imagination of the not quite adolescent young man who was going to grow up to write hundreds of science fiction and fantasy stories of his own. The Stapledon spoke directly and poignantly to me of my own circumstances as a bright and somewhat peculiar little boy stranded among normal folk; the Wells opened vistas of travel through space for me; the Taine delighted me for its vivid recreation of the Mesozoic era, which I, dinosaur-obsessed like most kids my age, desperately wanted to know and experience somehow at first hand. But it was the Lovecraft, I think, that had the most powerful impact on my developing vision of my own intentions as a creator of science fiction. It had a visionary quality that stirred me mightily; I yearned to write something like that myself, but, lacking the skill to do so when I was twelve, I had to be satisfied with writing clumsy little imitations of it. But I have devoted much effort in the many decades since to creating stories that approached the sweep and grandeur of Lovecraft's.

Note that I refer to "Shadow Out of Time" as science fiction (and that Wollheim included it in a collection explicitly called *Novels of Science*) even though Lovecraft is conventionally considered to be a writer of horror stories. So he was, yes; but most of his best stories, horrific though they were, were in fact generated out of the same willingness to speculate on matters of space and time that powered the work of Robert A. Heinlein and Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke. The great difference is that for Heinlein and Asimov and Clarke, science is exciting and marvelous, and for Lovecraft it is a source of terror. But a story that is driven by dread of science rather than by love and admiration for it is no less science fiction even so, if it makes use of the kind of theme (space travel, time travel, technological change) that we universally recognize as the material of SF.

And that is what much of Lovecraft's fiction does. The loathsome Elder Gods of the Cthulhu mythos are nothing other than aliens from other dimensions who have invaded Earth: this is, I submit, a classic SF theme. Such other significant Lovecraft tales as "The Rats in the

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Walls" and "The Colour out of Space" can be demonstrated to be science fiction as well. He was not particularly interested in that area of science fiction that concerned the impact of technology on human life (Huxley's *Brave New World*, Wells' *Food of the Gods*, etc.), or in writing sociopolitical satire of the Orwell kind, or in inventing ingenious gadgets; his concern, rather, was science as a source of scary visions. What terrible secrets lie buried in the distant irrecoverable past? What dreadful transformations will the far future bring? That he saw the secrets as terrible and the transformations as dreadful is what sets him apart at the horror end of the science fiction spectrum, as far from Heinlein and Asimov and Clarke as it is possible to be.

It is interesting to consider that although most of Lovecraft's previous fiction had made its first appearance in print in that pioneering horror/fantasy magazine, *Weird Tales*, "The Shadow Out of Time" quite appropriately was published first in the June, 1936 issue *Astounding Stories*, which was then the dominant science fiction magazine of its era, the preferred venue for such solidly science fictional figures as John W. Campbell, Jr., Jack Williamson, and E.E. Smith, Ph.D.

I should point out, though, that it seems as though *Astounding*'s editor, F. Orlin Tremaine, was uneasy about exposing his readers, accustomed as they were to the brisk basic-level functional prose of conventional pulp-magazine fiction, to Lovecraft's more elegant style. Tremaine subjected "The Shadow Out of Time" to severe editing in an attempt to homogenize it into his magazine's familiar mode, mainly by ruthlessly slicing Lovecraft's lengthy and carefully balanced paragraphs into two, three, or even four sections, but also tinkering with his punctuation and removing some of his beloved archaisms of vocabulary. The version of the story that has been reprinted again and again all these years is the Tremainified one; but now a new edition has appeared that's based on the original "Shadow" manuscript in Lovecraft's handwriting that unexpectedly turned up in 1995. This new edition—edited by S.T. Joshi and David E. Schultz, published as a handsome trade paperback in 2003 by Hippocampus Press, and bedecked with the deliciously gaudy painting, bug-eyed monsters and all, that bedecked the original 1936 *Astounding* appearance—is actually the first publication of the text as Lovecraft conceived it. Hippocampus Press is, I gather, a very small operation, but I found a copy of the book easily enough through ***Amazon.com***, and so should you.

Despite Tremaine's revisions, a few of *Astounding*'s readers still found Lovecraftian prose too much for their 1936 sensibilities. Reaction to the story was generally favorable, as we can see from the reader letters published in the August 1936 issue ("Absolutely magnificent!" said Cameron Lewis of New York. "I am at a loss for words. . . . This makes Lovecraft practically supreme, in my opinion.") But O.M. Davidson of Louisiana found Lovecraft "too tedious, too monotonous to suit me," even though he admitted that the imagery of the story "would linger with me for a long time." And Charles Pizzano of Dedham, Massachusetts, called it "all description and little else."

Of course I had no idea that

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Tremaine had meddled with Lovecraft's style when I encountered it back there in 1947 (which I now realize was just eleven years after its first publication, though at the time it seemed an ancient tale to me). Nor, indeed, were his meddlings a serious impairment of Lovecraft's intentions, though we can see now that this newly rediscovered text is notably more powerful than the streamlined Tremaine version. Perhaps the use of shorter paragraphs actually made things easier for my pre-adolescent self. In any case I found, in 1947, a host of wondrous things in "The Shadow Out of Time."

The key passage, for me, lay in the fourth chapter, in which Lovecraft conjured up an unforgettable vision of giant alien beings moving about in a weird library full of "horrible annals of other worlds and other universes, and of stirrings of formless life outside all universes. There were records of strange orders of beings which had peopled the world in forgotten pasts, and frightful chronicles of grotesque-bodied intelligences which would people it millions of years after the death of the last human being."

I wanted passionately to explore that library myself. I knew I could not: I would know no more of the furry prehuman Hyperborean worshippers of Tsathoggua and the wholly abominable Tcho-Tchos than Lovecraft chose to tell me, nor would I talk with the mind of Yiang-Li, the philosopher from the cruel empire of Tsan-Chan, which is to come in AD 5000, nor with the mind of the king of Lomar who ruled that terrible polar land one hundred thousand years before the squat, yellow Inutos came from the west to engulf it. But I read that page of Lovecraft ten thousand times—it is page 429 of the Wollheim anthology, page 56 of the new edition—and even now, scanning it this morning, it stirs in me the quixotic hunger to find and absorb all the science fiction in the world, every word of it, so that I might begin to know these mysteries of the lost imaginary kingdoms of time past and time future.

The extraordinary thing that Lovecraft provides in "Shadow" is a sense of a turbulent alternative history of Earth—not the steady procession up from the trilobite through amphibians and reptiles to primitive mammals that I had mastered by the time I was in the fourth grade, but a wild zigzag of pre-human species and alien races living here a billion years before our time, beings that have left not the slightest trace in the fossil record, but which I wanted with all my heart to believe in.

And it is the ultimate archaeological fantasy, too, for Lovecraft's protagonist takes us right down into the ruined city, which in his story, at least, is astonishingly still extant in remotest Australia, of the greatest of these ancient races. It is here that Lovecraft's bias toward science-as-horror emerges, for the narrator, unlike any archaeologist I've ever heard of, is scared stiff as he approaches his goal. He has visited it in dreams, and now, entering the real thing, "Ideas and images of the starkest terror began to throng in upon me and cloud my senses." He finds that he knows the ruined city "morbidly, horribly well" from his dreams. The whole experience is, he says, "brain-shattering." His sanity wobbles. He frets about "tides of abomination surging up through the cleft itself from depths

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unimagined and unimaginable." He speaks of the "accursed city" and its builders as "shambling horrors" that have a "terrible, soul-shattering actuality," and so on, all a little overwrought, as one expects from Lovecraft.

Well, I'd be scared silly too if I had found myself telepathically kidnapped and hauled off into a civilization of 150 million years ago, as Lovecraft's man was. But once I got back, and realized that I'd survived it all, I'd regard it as fascinating and wonderful, and not in any way a cause for monstrous, eldritch, loathsome, hideous, frightfully adjectival Lovecraftian terror, if I were to stumble on the actual archives of that lost civilization.

But if "Shadow" is overwrought, it is gloriously overwrought. Even if what he's really trying to do is scare us, he creates an awareness—while one reads it, at least—that history did not begin in Sumer or in the Pithecanthropine caves, but that the world was already incalculably ancient when man evolved, and had been populated and repopulated again and again by intelligent races, long before the first mammals, even, had ever evolved. It is wonderful science fiction. I urge you to go out and search for it. In it, after all, Lovecraft makes us witness to the excavation of an archive 150 million years old, the greatest of all archaeological finds. On that sort of time-span, Tutankh-amen's tomb was built just a fraction of a second ago. Would that it all were true, I thought, back then when I was twelve. And again, re-reading this stunning tale today: would that it were true. ○

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

MASTERY

lifetimes

Have you ever read **Henryk Sienkiewicz** <*http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1905/index.html*>, one of Poland's most famous writers? His most famous novel was *Quo Vadis,* but his collected works fill sixty volumes! He won the **Nobel Prize for Literature** <*http://nobelprize.org/literature*> in 1905.

How about **Pearl Buck** <*http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1938/index.html*>? In her day she was arguably the most popular author in the United States. The movie version of her novel, *The Good Earth,* won a couple of Oscars in 1937. Her Nobel came in 1938.

Eugenio Montale <*http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1975/index.html*>, the existentialist poet and essayist, was made a lifetime member of the Italian Senate to honor his courageous opposition to Fascism. He was awarded the prize in 1975.

No science fiction writer has ever won the Nobel Prize for literature, unless you count **William Golding** <*http://www.william-golding.co.uk*> who was honored in 1983. However, the author of **Lord of the Flies** <*http://www.gerenser.com/lotf*> and **The Inheritors** <*http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/14/alterman14art.htm*> is at best tangential to our enterprise, it says here; he is more of an allegorist than an extrapolator.

In 1975, the same year that Senatore Montale received his gold medal, the **Science Fiction Writers of America** <*http://www.sfwa.org*> awarded the first Grand Master Award. Like the Nobel, it celebrates lifetime achievement rather than endorsing any single work. The Grand Master awards process is simple: the President of SFWA proposes a candidate for Grand Master and then a majority of the sitting officers must approve the nomination. Originally the Grand Master Award was called just that, but in 2002 the name was changed to the Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award to honor the founder of SFWA. While the Grand Master Award looks just like a **Nebula Award** <*http://www.sfwa.org/awards*>, and is given at the Nebula banquet, it is not, in fact, a Nebula. Originally SFWA's plan was to name six Grand Masters every decade, but the pace has picked up of late, in part because so many worthy candidates are advancing in age. And there's the rub: you can't win the Grand Master posthumously. Thus ideal candidates like **Jules Verne** <*http://jv.gilead.org.il*> and **H. G. Wells** <*http://www.hgwellsusa.50megs.com*> or more recently **Cyril Kornbluth** <*http://www.luna-city.com/sf/cmk.htm*>, **James**

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Blish <*http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Blish*> and **James Tiptree, Jr.** <*http://mtsu32.mtsu.edu:11072/Tiptree*> will never be Grand Masters.

I set out to write this column with some trepidation, worried that the genre greats that I read growing up would have little or no web presence. But I was pleasantly surprised: with a few exceptions, most of our Grand Masters have sites of some sort—and many of them are very wonderful indeed. So here, in chronological order, is a count up of science fiction's Grand Masters.

count up

1975: In the same way that George Washington *had* to be the first President of the United States, Robert A. Heinlein *had* to be our first Grand Master. It's no surprise that Heinlein is all over the net; he even has his own **web-ring** <*http://www.ringsurf.com/netring?ring=Heinlein;action=list*> of eleven sites. Oddly enough, the official and possibly the best Heinlein site, **The Heinlein Society** <*http://www.heinleinsociety.org*> is not part of that ring.

1976: Although Jack Williamson appears to have no official website, you can read three different interviews with him at **Science Fiction Weekly** <*http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue284/interview.html*>, **SF Site** <*http://www.sfsite.com/03b/jw77.htm*>, and **SF Crowsnest** <*http://www.computercrowsnest.com/sfnews/news1099.htm*>.

1977: Clifford D. Simak is an under-rated writer whose work slips in and out of print, alas. Start your journey to Simak Country at the **Clifford Simak Fan Site** <*http://www.tc.umn.edu/~brams007/simak/default.htm*> and continue on to a fine English language site based in the Czech Republic, **Parallel Worlds of Clifford D. Simak** <*http://www.natur.cuni.cz/~vpetr/Simak1.htm*>.

1979: L. Sprague de Camp was an elegant man and he has an elegant official site at **L. Sprague de Camp.com** <*http://www.lspraguedecamp.com*>. It offers biographical and bibliographical pages, scans of cover art and a generous helping of family photographs.

1982: A dedicated British fan of Fritz Leiber has created the **Lankhmar** <*http://www.lankhmar.demon.co.uk*> site, but the best thing on the web about the creator of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser is Justin Leiber's **reminiscence** <*http://www.hfac.uh.edu/phil/leiber/fritz.htm*> of his father and grandfather.

1984: Andre Norton fan Matt Zaleski has built the comprehensive **Andre-Norton.org** <*http://www.andre-norton.org*>. His links page points to thirteen other Norton sites.

1986: Arthur C. Clarke readers have their pick of many fine sites. Although the **Arthur C. Clarke Unauthorized Homepage** is Google's top link <*http://www.lsi.usp.br/~rbianchi/clarke*>, it was last updated in 2000. **Sir Arthur C. Clarke** <*http://www.geocities.com=jcsherwood/ACClinks2.htm*> is a much better bet. **The Arthur C. Clarke Foundation** <*http://www.clarkefoundation.org*> is worth a look if you're interested in Sir Arthur's extra-literary projects.

1987: There is no better resource on Isaac Asimov than the **Isaac Asimov Home Page** <*http://www.asimovonline.com*>, although

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I must say that the ambition of **Jenkins' Spoiler-Laden Guide to Isaac Asimov** <*http://homepage.mac.com/jhjenkins/Asimov/Asimov.html*> has always impressed me.

1988: I was disappointed to discover that the great Alfred Bester is not well represented on the web. There are the beginnings of a **wikipedia** entry <*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Bester_%28author%29*>, an all-too-short **Templeton Gate page** <*http://members.tripod.com/templetongate/bester.htm*>, and a couple of **appreciations** <*http://www.ansible.co.uk/writing/bester.html*> by the irreplaceable **Dave Langford** <*http://www.ansible.co.uk/index.html*>. Alfred Bester was one of the most influential of all the Grand Masters. He deserves better!

1989: **Ray Bradbury's** <*http://www.raybradbury.com*> site has major *wow* factor. This is the kind of site every writer dreams of having; lots of free and interesting content, including generous excerpts from many of Ray's classics. It even has Quicktime clips of Ray discussing his life and work.

1991: Lester del Rey is another Grand Master whose work has been unjustly overlooked by netizens. There's a glance at his career at **Spacelight** <*http://www.gwillick.com/Spacelight/delrey.html*> and a decent **CyberSpace Spinner Bibliography** <*http://www.hycyber.com/SF/delrey_lester.html*>. Perhaps the most interesting del Rey site is Lester's pungent and wrong-headed **review of 2001, a Space Odyssey** <*http://www.visualmemory.co.uk/amk/doc/0045.html*>. "It will probably be a box-office disaster, too, and thus set major science-fiction movie making back another ten years."

1993: We definitely need more Frederik Pohl sites. The **wikipedia** entry <*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederik_Pohl*> is pretty barebones. Elsewhere, look for the **SF Site interview** <*http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue240/interview.html*> and a transcription of a **talk** <*http://www.testermanscifi.org/FredPohlPart1.html*> he gave at RoVaCon in 1988, followed by lively Q and A.

1995: We come now to the most inexplicable gap of all. The Grand Master Award is named after Damon Knight. The founder of SFWA and co-founder of Clarion influenced hree generations of writers by his teaching and his writing, especially his short fiction. He was one

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of our best critics. Yet his **wikipedia** entry <*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Damon_Knight*> is shamefully brief. There's an okay bibliography at **Fantastic Fiction** <*http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/authors/Damon_Knight.htm*> and we have a website that Damon himself designed **Will the Real Hieronymus Bosch Please Stand Up** <*http://www.fictionwise.com/knight*>. But to understand the impact the man had on our genre, check out the tributes on **In Loving Memory of Damon Knight** <*http://www.kaatspaw.com/Damon.htm*>.

1996: A.E. Van Vogt was fortunate to have a fan like Magnus Axelsson, whose **The Weird Worlds of A.E. Van Vogt** <*http://vanvogt.www4.mmedia.is*> is just about the perfect fan site. Yes, there is a bibliography and jpgs of book covers and some first rate criticism, but what I like best is that Magnus has posted the first chapters of four of Van Vogt's best known novels.

1997: The place to start looking for Jack Vance on the web is Mike Berro's **The Jack Vance Information Page** <*http://www.massmedia.com/~mikeb/jvm*>. It's timely and comprehensive and oh-so-well-designed. But don't forget **The Jack Vance Archive** <*http://www.jackvance.com*> which effectively makes the case that Jack Vance is an international publishing phenomenon.

1998: Another puzzling gap—Poul Anderson remained an artistic force in the genre up until his death in 2001, but he has no definitive website that I could find—the **wikipedia** <*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poul_Anderson*> is short on biography and offers only a partial bibliography. About the best bio you'll find is at **The Templeton Gate** <*http://members.tripod.com/templetongate/anderson.htm*>.

1999: A simple but effective site for **Hal Clement** <*http://www.sff.net/people/hal-clement*>, the pseudonym of Harry Stubbs, who was a fixture of the New England SF scene ever since I was knee high to an adjective, was created by Tania Ruiz. It has photos and a bibliography and an essay Hal wrote about the science in science fiction. There's also a very cool page about Hal at **Testerman Sci-Fi Site** <*http://www.testermanscifi.org/ClementPage.html*>.

2000: **The Official Brian Aldiss Site** <*http://www.brianwaldiss.com/index.htm*> is yet another exemplar of what a professional writer's site should be. It's timely and generous with free content, including several audio files. To get a sense of what Brian is really like, though, read his witty interview at **SF Crowsnest** <*http://www.computercrowsnest.com/sfnews2/03_jan/news0103_1.shtml*>.

2001: **Philip José Farmer** <*http://www.pjfarmer.com*> gets it. Here's a first rate author's website overseen by a first rate author. I was particularly pleased by the photos and the time line and the reading lists.

2003: **Ursula K. Le Guin's** <*http://www.ursulakleguin.com*> site is as thoughtful and elegant as her wonderful stories. This is a deeply personal site, most, if not all, of which is written by Ursula herself. If you read nothing else here, check the FAQ section. Lovely!

2004: I have mentioned Jon Davis's **Quasi-Official Robert Silverberg Home Page** <*http://www.majipoor.com*> so many times in this space that I ought to be put on his payroll. This is a great site,

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okay? Meanwhile, according to Jon's links page, our very own Grand Master has at least twenty other sites devoted to his prodigious output.

2005: Our newest Grand Master, Anne McCaffrey, has a definitive official site: **The Worlds of Anne McCaffrey** <*http://www.annemccaffrey.net*>. It has all the features you'd expect, and some interesting twists as well. For example, on the Poll Page, you can vote for which actors you'd like to see cast in the movie version of various of Anne's books and stories. Her works have inspired many fans to write fan fiction, create fan art, and build on and offline games and virtual realities. The newsgroup **alt.fan.pern** <*http://kumo.swcp.com/~quirk/afp-index.shtml*> is devoted to discussion of works by Anne and her fans.

exit

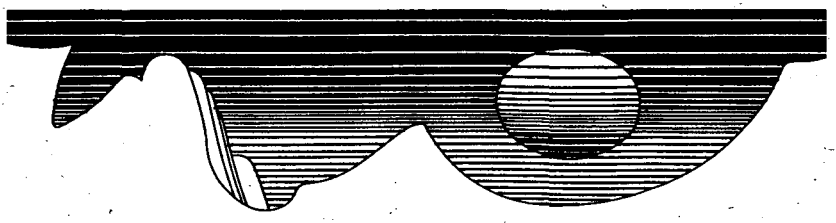
Here's a quick plug for a couple of fine compendium sites mentioned in passing above. Galen Strickland, the webmaster of **The Templeton Gate** <*http://members.tripod.com/templetongate/mainpage.htm*>, is in the process of building a useful critical site. He writes that "It is my intention to devote space to some writers whose works might be a bit obscure to all but the most die-hard SF fans." George C. Willick's **SPACELIGHT** <*http://www.gwillick.com/Spacelight*> advertises itself as "The library of fantasy and science fiction vital statistics and personal data."

Last and certainly not least, there's the **Wikipedia** <*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page*>, a Web-based, free-content encyclopedia, which is written collaboratively by volunteers, i.e., *you*. That's right, gentle reader; if you want to edit an entry, go for it!

To quote from Wikipedia's entry on itself: "Its status as a reference work has been controversial. It has received praise for being free, editable, and covering a wide range of topics. It has been criticized for lack of authority when compared with a traditional encyclopedia, systemic bias, and for deficiencies in traditional encyclopedic topics."

To which Wikipedians might reply, if you don't like it, you can fix it. That's the beauty of wiki.

Here's hoping that some Alfred Bester, Lester del Rey, Damon Knight, Fred Pohl, and Poul Anderson fans might soon rise to the occasion. ○



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THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Therese Littleton

INVASION OF THE VINYL SPACE MONKEYS

The Stylishly Strange World of Designer Toys

Science fiction and toys go together like peanut butter and jelly. But after decades of the same old sparking ray guns, wind-up robots, and squeezable "stress relief" gray alien heads, maybe it's time to drop some new style into our toy chests.

We buy toys at least partly to advertise our love of the genre. Skiffy toys adorn our cubicles, dangle from our rear-view mirrors, and end up gathering dust in our basements. Some of us are bona-fide toy collectors, spending hefty chunks of cash on rare tin toys and hard-to-find action figures, preferably "mint in box." I know one *Star Wars* collector who buys three of every new toy—one to play with, one to sell on eBay later, and one to keep pristine in its packaging (presumably forever). Most of us aren't quite that . . . intense . . . about our toys, but we do accumulate pieces of colorful, molded plastic nonetheless.

Since the SF community prides itself on being future-focused, why do we insist on preserving the stale relic toys of three years ago? It's time for a toy update, my fellow fans.

These days, if the coolest thing you've got propped up on your computer monitor is a wind-up Robbie the Robot, you're missing out on a toy revolution. It's called "urban vinyl" and it's the best thing to happen to collectable toys since George Lucas first heard the words "tie-in." In 2004, *Wired* magazine called these hip new toys "action figures with street cred." Urban vinyl toys are to yesterday's playthings what DVDs are to videotapes.

Urban Vinyl Origins

In 1997, designer Michael Lau tricked out some old twelve-inch action figures, customizing them as streetwise hip-hop bad boys, and took them to a Hong Kong toy show. Artistically minded toy fans went crazy for the idea, and before long, specialty stores were pushing weird sets of highly collectable—and sometimes very expensive—plastic or vinyl figurines, produced in small batches. The new scene had lots of overlap with graffiti art and hip-hop music, as well as with comics and science fiction.

Kitschy, cheap, and sold in limited quantities, these designer toys took up where Hello Kitty left off, but without the heavy dose of saccharine. Cool, collectable figures like Kubricks, Stikfas, and Qees (pronounced "keys") displayed a new, clean, and very weird sense of artistic style. People started debating the merits of various plastic materials, painting techniques, and "sculpt to articulation" ratios, and a cult was born. Generation-X toy fans who were weaned on *Star Wars* toys and Micronauts—but who disdained action figures of modern films or comics as too fannish—found a new outlet for their obsessions.

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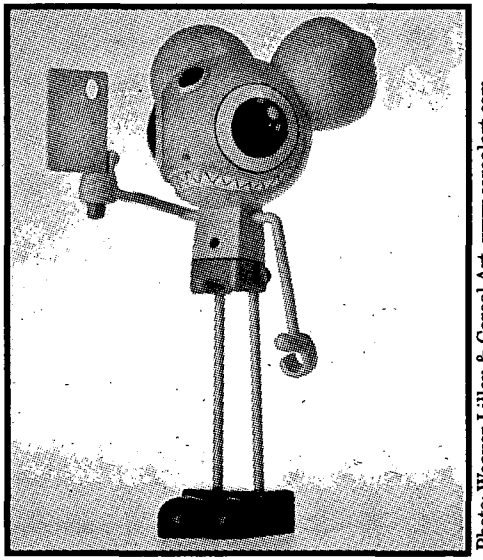

Photo: Weaver Lilley & Cereal Art, www.cerealart.com

One of Dalek's cleaver-brandishing Space Monkey toys.

Reality check: to non-SF fans, a grown-up toy collector represents the height of nerdiness, a person who has failed to mature, maybe even a social misfit. After all, who doesn't snicker at the comic shop owner character on "The Simpsons," a perfect example of the pedantic, minutiae-spouting collector type?

But the great thing about urban vinyl is that on a Venn diagram of science fiction, obsessive collection, and trendy style, this phenomenon exists at the intersection. Buy all the designer toys you want! Keep them mint in box, if you want. No one can really make fun of you, because that's exactly what all the cool kids are doing, too, for a change.

What makes these toys "designer"? Style, style, style.

As urban vinyl became more popular in the West, manufacturers sought out graphic designers, graffiti legends, and artists to come up with their own toys, either working from a template or starting from scratch. Indie comic artists Tim Biskup and Jim Woodring have lines of designer toys. So do graffiti and underground artists such as Quik, Lase NYC, Doze, and Dalek. Young artists are excited to be working in this new medium, and specialty toy manufacturers are equally eager to hire them.

(If you're feeling lost or very, very old at this point in our tour of urban vinyl, take a deep breath and remind yourself that we're just talking about toys here.)

Pop Art Meets Science Fiction

Toy2R, the company that makes Qees, is one designer toy outfit that provides artists with blank toy templates and lets them create custom paint jobs or accessories. The resulting one-of-a-kind toys are shown in pop culture galleries as the 3-D

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equivalent of a canvas or drawing—something between a painting and a sculpture. Limited edition Qees are produced featuring favorite artists' designs, and are snapped up by collectors. For artists, the templates provide a whole new way of expressing themselves, marketing their style, and—most importantly—making a living doing what they love.

Dalek, also known as James Marshall, took his working name from the Doctor Who television series. His characters, including knife-wielding space monkeys, are available printed on posters, mousepads, shower curtains, and skateboard decks, or as vinyl toys <*www.dalekart.com*>. Dalek is a perfect example of the crossover between science fiction and designer toys.

Science fiction "just sort of creeps in," he says. "The beauty of science fiction and where I draw most directly from it are its infinite possibilities. There are no limits . . . no finites. You can create your own worlds."

Dalek's space monkeys are strange and vaguely threatening aliens with disarming habits. His description of them sounds like something Philip K. Dick might have come up with:

"What are Space Monkeys? Where are they from? Are they born alive, or are they incubated in egg-like vessels? Why do they smirk at us as if they know something we don't? Even when they are suffering from what would be moments of human weakness—like a hole in the head or a recently amputated limb—they continue to smile and stare, assuring their control of the moment. Why do they always march to the left? Is there a mothership calling? Are their hearts situated on the left side of their bodies like ours? We can only guess."

Like most science fiction fans, Dalek grew up with the genre firmly entrenched in his life. "My science fiction fixes come mostly in TV and movie form. When I was younger, I read a lot of X-Men comics. I liked the Avengers as well, and Daredevil. . . . I grew up watching *Doctor Who*, *Twilight Zone*, *Star Trek*, that kind of stuff. . . . *Star Wars*, of course."

With urban vinyl toy names like "Futura Nosferatu," "Mecha-Boy," and "AXTRX," it's clear that science fiction is a huge source of inspiration in this new world of collectable fun.

At the designer toy shop OKOK in Seattle, employee Max Field Woodring agrees that science fiction is a big source of design material, but in a more general sense. "You'd be hard pressed to find toys with a time travel theme, for instance," he says. He shows me dozens of toys that would look really good lined up on any SF fan's shelf.

There are the HazMapo figures, strange, big-headed guys in futuristic protective gear. The Neo-Kaiju resemble Japanese movie monsters, only cuter and weirder. Woodring

MOVING?

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tells me about a toy that sold out in less than a day—a steampunk version of Godzilla's 3-headed foe, King Ghidora. The toy brand Kubricks has a line of battlesuit toys called Maschinen Krieger, as well as cute spacemen and robot figures. The "Space Friends" toys are a set of adorable aliens with big mouths and goofy eyes. "Blitz" by KAWS is a funky rocket with feet and a face.

Some of the toys come in plastic capsules made for vending machines. Others are in "blind boxes," and you can't tell which one of a series you're buying until you get home and tear open the package.

It's as hard to describe these toys as it is to tell someone about a painting you like. The Neo-Kaiju series includes toys designed by five prominent artists, including Kathy Staico-Schorr and Todd Schorr. Kathy's "Trilomonk" is a smiling gray monkey with a UFO-shaped head, riding on a giant trilobite. Todd's "Steam Punk" looks like a spherical boiler on spindly legs, with three red-eyed snake heads and tattered devil wings. As lone pieces and as part of the Neo-Kaiju series, they strike a balance between irresistible playthings and visually arresting *objets d'art.*

Max Woodring explains why artist-designed toys fly off the shelves. "A comics fan might not buy a print from an artist, but they will buy a toy. Then they might learn about the artist and collect the rest of his or her toys."

The main difference between designer toys and old-school collectable toys is that most urban vinyl designs aren't based on any existing franchise—they're all original. Sure, you can spend a fortune on eBay to get a classic Boba Fett action figure, but if you really want to make a statement, urban vinyl toys tell their own stories.

Many science-fictional designer toys use retro-SF elements in their design, from big bubble helmets to mechanized armor and strange antennae. But all of these elements are remixed in unpredictable ways. For example, I think Doze's "TravelA" figures look like monstrous spaceworkers on their way to clock in at some asteroid mine.

Join the Revolution

Does all this leave the traditional action figure out in the cold? Not really. A visit to your local comic shop will reveal that there's a whole separate vinyl toy world out there. Hyper-realistic busts of Captain Picard and *The Matrix*'s Neo are selling for fifty bucks alongside busty robot-girls from anime franchises and muscular fantasy heroes. McFarlane is one of the most prominent toy companies in the realistic comic and movie figure biz, and they make most of the collectable action figures for SF film and television franchises. The action figure business is booming, and big box stores such as Target and Toys R Us stock whole aisles with them.

Tie-in toys for big-budget movies can help make or break the budget, as George Lucas has proved time and time again. The market includes both collectors combing stores for one elusive toy, and casual purchasers. Even . . . (gasp) . . . kids. As traditional action figures get more and more detailed, requiring artists to hand-paint or sculpt their prototypes, the difference between traditional action figures and urban vinyl is starting to narrow.

While there may be some overlap

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in the collector's market for traditional figures and designer toys, it's hard to imagine anyone but a science fiction fan having a broad enough appetite for the fantastic to encompass both styles.

My first designer toy was a Qee keychain figure of a vaguely robotic teddy bear with a striped surfboard accessory, a gift from some friends who picked it up at Comic-Con in San Diego. Since then, I've been haunting OKOK and Schmancy, another designer toy shop in Seattle, looking for more. Schmancy holds monthly receptions where customers can meet up-and-coming artists while eating cupcakes and ogling the latest shipment of toys. If I have five bucks to spend, I can get a new toy for my cubicle, or a gift for a friend.

I have discovered, however, that not everyone appreciates the aesthetic of urban vinyl. One friend merely shrugged in confusion at the Kozik Smoking Bunny I got her, even though these items are in high demand among enthusiasts. Urban vinyl appeals to a special sort of person, a . . . weird sort of person.

Now that you're interested, you'll want a Qee of your own. The best places to find the hottest new designer toys are in Japan or Hong Kong, but if you can't afford to have your toys shipped across the Pacific, urban vinyl specialty shops are popping up in major cities. With stores online and in New York, L.A., and San Francisco, designer toy headquarters in the United States is Kid Robot <*www.kidrobot.com*>.

In the UK, one of the top urban vinyl shops is Playlounge <*www.playlounge.co.uk*>, with both online and storefront presences. Plenty of web sites carry the toys, including Rotofugi <*www.rotofugi.com*>, My Plastic Heart <*www.myplasticheart.com*>, and Toy Tokyo <*www.toytokyo.com*>. Many of the online sources for the rarest of these toys have .jp domains, a clue that shipping is going to cost you a fortune.

One New York toy and design outfit, Sweatyfrog <*www.sweatyfrog.com*>, encourages would-be toy moguls to come up with their own urban vinyl creations. They'll even help you find a producer in Hong Kong to bring your ideas to life. But before you run out and draw up plans for your own toys, be sure to read the FAQ. The cost of producing a one-thousand-piece vinyl toy run is estimated at about fifteen thousand dollars.

If you're serious about collecting Asian toys, you could always do what my *Star Wars*-obsessed pal does—go in with some other fanatics on your very own shipping container unit to fill up with rare toys in Hong Kong or Tokyo. It'll cost you a bundle, but you'll have all the latest urban vinyl before it hits the streets.

Just one word of advice: when you go down to the docks to get your container, it's probably best not to tell the longshoremen that you're looking for a big box of space monkeys. ○

By day, Therese Littleton is an associate curator at the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame. By night, she is a freelance writer and part-time science teacher. She has a growing collection of space monkeys.

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The author tells us, "If you google the name James Maxey, you'll turn up a British attorney, a vice-president of a Missouri accounting firm, and a geeky guy in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, whose links lead to rants about comic books, circus freaks, and tequila." The relevant James Maxey is the last one. His debut novel, the superhero adventure *Nobody Gets the Girl,* is available from Phobos Books. His first story for us takes a sharp look at the future, and lends a stark interpretation to the phrase . . .

TO THE EAST, A BRIGHT STAR

James Maxey

A word of warning: there are brief scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some readers.

There was a shark in the kitchen. The shark wasn't huge, maybe four feet long, gliding across the linoleum toward the refrigerator. Tony stood motionless in the knee-deep water of the dining room. The Wolfman said that the only sharks that came this far in were bull sharks, which could live in either salt or fresh water, and were highly aggressive. Tony leaned forward cautiously and shut the door to the kitchen. He had known the exact time and date of his death for most of his adult life. With only hours to go, he wasn't about to let the shark do something ironic.

Tony waded back to the living room. Here in the coolest part of the house, always shaded, he kept his most valuable possession in an ice-chest stashed beneath the stairs. He pulled away the wooden panel and retrieved the red plastic cooler. Inside was his cigar box, wrapped in plastic bags. He took the box, then grabbed one of the jugs of rainwater cooling in the corner and headed up the stairs to the bathroom. He climbed out the bathroom window onto the low sloping roof over the back porch.

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Everything was damp from yesterday's rain. He took out the silver case with his last three cigarettes. He went through five matches before he got one lit. He sucked down the stale smoke, while a tiny little voice in the back of his head chided him about his bad habits. Tony wished the tiny little voice would consult a calendar. It was a bit late to worry about cancer.

The sky shimmered with brilliant blue, not a cloud in it. The Wolfman had thought Tony was crazy to gamble on this day being clear. It had rained two hundred days the previous year. A decade ago a comet had hit Antarctica, melting half the ice cap, pumping countless tons of water vapor into the atmosphere. Cloudless skies were only a memory. And yet, in Tony's imagination, the sky of the last day had always been crystal clear. It pleased him that reality and imagination overlapped at last.

A slight breeze set waves gently lapping at the tumbled roofs and walls that lay in all directions. This had been a nice old neighborhood, full of Victorian houses, before the earthquakes started. Now only a few homes stood, twisted and strangely beautiful, half submerged in a shallow green ocean, surrounded by the salt-poisoned skeletons of trees still stretching toward that amazing blue sky.

"Here's to a gorgeous day," he said, raising his water jug toward the sun. He brought the jug to his lips and chugged down half a gallon, quickly, in careless gulps, with water running from the corners of his mouth, dripping down to soak his shirt. He no longer saw any point in being careful with fresh water. It felt good to be wasteful again.

His thirst sated, Tony capped the jug, walked to the edge of the roof, and dropped the water into his boat. He steadied himself, turned around, held his hands over his head, then flipped backward. He landed on his feet in the center of the aluminum skiff, his arms stretched for balance as the craft gently rocked.

"So what do you think, *Pop*?" he asked, imagining his father had been watching.

Tony knew exactly what Pop would think.

"The bit with the boat, just a gimmick," Tony answered, his voice taking on a touch of an Italian accent. "And the back flip . . . *sloppy*. The people want *form*."

"Whatever," Tony said, his voice once more his own. The old bastard never had a kind word for him. Or even a truthful one. Last year he'd met up with Pete Pyro the Fire King over at the Dixie.

"God Hell," Pete had stammered when he finally recognized him. "Rico told me you'd gone and died of AIDS, Tony."

Which had indicated to Tony that his father wasn't open to the idea of eventual reconciliation. But what the hell. There are only so many days in a life. You can't get around to everything.

Tony untied the rope and pushed the boat away from the house. Taking up oars, he maneuvered through the submerged streets. The sun beat down with a terrible force. It was two hours before sunset. Normally, he never went out during the day. When it wasn't raining, it could reach higher than the old dial thermometer back at the house could measure, and it had marks to one hundred ten. But the whole show ended only an hour after dark, and it would take a little while to reach the old Dixie Ho-

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tel, the tallest building still standing downtown. From its roof, he'd be maybe sixty feet higher than he would have been back at his house. Not much, but there was something in him which still craved heights. The higher he could get, the better the show.

Except for the splash and creak of oars, the world was silent. It had been almost a year since he'd seen a bird, three weeks since he'd had to hide from a helicopter, and six days since the Wolfman had changed his mind and headed west. He'd gone in search of the government shelter near Black Mountain, with hydroponic gardens, nuclear power, the works.

"I hear if you put all them tunnels end to end, they cover four hundred miles," the Wolfman had said. "There's room for one more."

Tony shook his head. At best there were cold little cages for crazy people, or cripples, or junkies. The Wolfman was a little of all three. Tony missed him.

Ahead loomed the islands of rubble that marked the downtown. Rusted steel beams were tangled together in great heaps, and mirrored glass gleamed beneath the surface of the sea. The Dixie rose above all this, six stories of old red brick that had somehow survived the quakes, the flooding, and the terrible unending heat. A month ago, the Dixie had been a noisy place, a Mecca for those left behind by accident or choice. He and the Wolfman had come here often. They'd survived the last few years by scavenging, and the Dixie had been a place to trade canned goods and batteries for booze and fresh vegetables. Some old geezer named Doc had filled the upper floors of the Dixie with potted plants, and his horticultural prowess provided garden goodies all year round. Also, Doc had rigged up a distillery for fresh water, plus another for booze. He'd been king of his little world, one of the last bastions of the good life, while it lasted.

A month ago the helicopters had come and taken everyone, whether they wanted to go or not. They'd smashed the stills and tossed plants into the ocean and Tony still couldn't see the sense in it. He and the Wolfman had steered clear of the place since, in case the helicopters came back. But now it would be safe. There would be no search and rescue at this late hour.

He tied off his boat on the east side, in the shade. A steady breeze was blowing in from the north now, taking the teeth out of the heat. He gulped thirstily from the water jug, then poured what was left over his face and hair. He pulled off his sweat-soaked shirt, and tossed it into the sea. He untied the tarp, and unfolded a fresh cotton shirt he'd saved for this occasion. He picked up his boombox, with its missing left speaker cover, and plugged in the fresh batteries he'd been saving. Over the years he'd traded away most of the CDs he'd found, keeping only a copy of *All Hail West Texas* by the Mountain Goats, a scratched-up double CD set of Mozart, and a K-Tel collection of disco hits. He still hadn't made up his mind what he was going to play.

Finally, he unwrapped the four layers of trash bags from the humidor. The box's contents would make all of his efforts worthwhile. He stepped through a window, into a shadowy room ankle-deep in brine. The Dixie moaned like a giant oboe as the wind rushed through the open windows.

The stairs creaked with each step. Emptied of its people, the Dixie seemed haunted. A place he associated with life and light now sat dark

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and dead, the air foul with rot. No doubt the place had moaned and creaked just as loudly on his past visits, but then the sounds were masked with laughter and talk and. . . .

He stopped. Was the wind making that sound?

He climbed three more steps.

Crying. Someone was crying, somewhere above.

He crept up to the next landing. There was no doubt now.

"Hello?" he called out.

The crying stopped short.

"Hello?" he called again.

A woman began shouting, in a rapid, nearly unintelligible rush of syllables and sobs. He followed the sound, racing up two flights of stairs. He rushed past open doors, drawing nearer, until the woman's voice was clearly coming from a door on his left. He almost stepped through, but caught himself, grabbing the doorframe. The room beyond had no floor, and was only a pit dropping all the way back down to the water.

Across the void of the floorless room was an open door, in which Esmerelda stood, naked and filthy and thin.

He couldn't understand what she was saying. She was spitting out words between sobs, with a little laughter mixed in. Esmerelda was a fairly new arrival at the Dixie, having been traded to Doc a few months ago in exchange for a case of booze. When he'd seen her last, she'd been a shapely young thing, with sinister eyes. She'd looked like she hated everyone on Earth, and who could blame her? Now, she just looked terrified and hungry.

"Just hold on," Tony said, studying the situation. The light was nearly gone. It looked like a twenty-foot drop, maybe more, into a real mess of jagged rubble.

"Stay calm," he said. "I'll be back."

She screamed as he left the doorway.

He made it back to the boat in less than a minute. The water danced with black shadows and red flames. Night was moments away. He found his rope, and ran back up the stairs.

She waited in the far doorway, quiet now, and had found a sheet and draped it over her body. Her eyes were wide, glistening in the gloom.

"You're real," she said.

"I try," said Tony.

She pulled the sheet tighter around her shoulders.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Soldiers came," she said. "I hid. When it got quiet, I came out. The floor was gone."

"Jesus. You've been trapped all this time?"

She looked down into the pit. He could barely understand her as she answered. "Doc said they would come for him. He said they'd kill me. I wasn't important, like him. He told me he'd made traps."

"Let's get you out of there," Tony said. "Catch."

He tossed a coil of rope. She moved to catch it, but pulled her arms back as her sheet slipped. Fortunately, the rope landed in the room, and snagged on the floor's jagged edge as it slid back.

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"Okay," he said. "Are you good at knots? I need you to tie that tightly to the sturdiest thing in the room."

She slowly knelt and grabbed the rope, looking slightly dazed.

"Come on," he said. "Time's wasting. You gotta trust me."

She disappeared into the room. Tony looked at his watch. This wasn't how he'd planned to spend the evening. He should go on, leave her to her own devices. Except he hated people who thought like that, and now was a bad time to turn into someone he hated.

"It's tied," she said, reappearing.

Tony took up the slack, then yanked on the rope, putting his full weight on it. It felt solid from her end. He tugged the rope to a radiator pipe in the hall and tied his end, bracing his foot against the wall to pull it as taut as possible.

Then, without stopping to think about it, he stepped into the room, onto the rope, which sagged beneath him. He kept moving. Five six seven steps—and he was across, stepping into her room. Esmerelda stood there with her mouth open.

"Let's hurry this up," Tony said with a glance at his watch. He began to unbutton his shirt. Esmerelda backed away.

He held the shirt out to her.

"Wear this," he said. "I don't want to trip over that sheet when I carry you back."

"C-carry me?"

"I've walked wires with both my sisters standing on my shoulders. We'll make it."

"You're crazy," she said.

"*Jesus*," he said. "There isn't time for discussion. The Tony Express leaves the station in one minute." He placed the folded shirt on her shoulder, then turned around. "I won't look."

He studied the room she'd been trapped in. It was filled with flower pots and plastic tubs in which various green things were growing, some with little yellow blossoms. The room smelled like a sewer. There was a medicine cabinet on the wall, and pipes where the tub and sink had been. The rope was tied to the base of a shattered toilet, beside which sat a basin of clear water. Above this was a small window, through which he could see the night sky. He was on the wrong side of the building for the big show.

She touched his shoulder, lightly.

He turned. She wore his shirt now, which made her seem smaller, and there were tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Hey," he said. "Don't cry."

"I don't . . . I don't know if this is really happening. I've had . . . I've been having *dreams*."

"The Wolfman used to say, 'Some dreams you gotta ride.'" He pointed to his back. "Hop on."

Tentatively, she wrapped her arms around his neck. She smelled earthy, and her skin felt oily and hot against his. He lifted her. She was light, all bones and skin.

"Don't flinch," he said, and stepped onto the rope. She flinched, tighten-

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ing her grip on his throat, her legs clamping around his waist. He moved cautiously, his feet listening to the messages the rope was sending. It wasn't good. Individual strands of the hemp were popping and snapping. The pipe he'd tied the rope to in the hall was pulling free of its braces. Move move move *move*.

"*Alley oop!*" he cried, jumping forward. Esmerelda shrieked. He landed in the doorway and stumbled into the hall. He pried her arms off of his trachea. "We made it. It's okay. It's okay."

She dropped from his back, trembling, laughing, crying.

"G-God. Oh God," she stammered. "I'm out. I'm out. I can still get to safety."

"You're as safe as you're ever going to be," he said.

"No!" she cried out. "Don't you know? Don't you know? How can you not know? There's a comet that's going to hit near here. A big one! We've only got until May 8 to get to—"

"That's today," he said. "We've got fifteen minutes."

She turned pale. She placed a hand against the wall.

Tony grabbed his stuff and headed for the stairs.

"C'mon," he said, racing up the steps two at a time.

Tony opened the door to the roof. The sky was black and silver, with a thin sliver of moon. A dozen comets streamed from the direction of the vanished sun. And to the east, a bright star, brighter than the moon, with a halo filling half the sky.

"Wow," he said.

He looked back. Esmerelda was halfway up the stairs, looking at him.

"Come on," he said. "You don't want to miss this, do you? This is the kind of sky I dreamed about as a kid. A sky full of mysteries and wonders."

Esmerelda shook her head and turned, but didn't leave.

Tony shrugged. What did it matter if she didn't watch? He thought it strange, but then, everybody always thought *he* was strange, so who was he to judge? He'd planned to be alone anyway. But now that he had an audience, he was overcome with the need to talk.

"When I was ten, Mom bought me a telescope to see it," he said. "The brown star, I mean. Way out there, beyond Pluto. It wasn't much to look at. Scientists got all worked up, talking about how fast it was moving, where it had come from, where it was going, and all the damage it was doing by altering the orbits of comets. But in the telescope, it just hung there, a boring coffee-colored dot."

Tony sat down, his back against a chimney, the humidor in his lap.

"It's an exciting time to be alive, don't you think?"

She didn't answer.

Tony opened the humidor, revealing the syringe. He lifted it, and looked at the sky through the fluid-filled glass. It swirled with dreams and memories.

"You know how kids want to run away and join the circus?"

She didn't answer. He wasn't sure she could hear him.

"It works the other way around, too. My folks, my older sisters, they were the Flying Fiorentinos, Aerialists Extraordinaire! Pop had big plans for me, being the first son. He had me training for the high wire while I was still in diapers."

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Tony ran his finger along the old scars on his arm. "When I was about fifteen, the circus got a new snake lady, Satanica. Twice my age, but open-minded. She was a junkie. Wasn't long before I was hooked, too. You can handle snakes while you're in the haze. Hell, the snakes like it. But junk and the high wire don't mix that well. So, Pop got Satanica busted. I ran off that night to visit her in jail. Never got to see her. But I never went back to the circus."

Against the bright sky, the waves of heat from the roof shimmered and danced. Tony sighed.

"I hate my Pop. He never gave a damn about me. I was just part of his act. A *prop* or something."

He looked back at the stairs. Esmerelda sat in the doorway, her back to him. She had her face pressed against her knees, her arms locked tightly around her shins. He readied the needle. The star of the east blazed bright now, casting shadows. If his watch was right, and he'd taken a lot of care over the years to see that it was, and if the astronomers were right, and their track record through all this had been pretty good, there were nine minutes, forty seconds left.

"Three years ago, I got off the junk," he said, tying the thick rubber tube around his arm. "But I made sure I'd have one last dose. Because the best moments of my life were spent floating on junk, curled up in the arms of my snake woman. That's what I want to take with me. How 'bout you? How do you want to spend the rest of your life?"

Esmerelda spoke, her voice tense and angry. "At least you were born *before* they found the rogue star. My folks *knew*. And they brought me into the world anyway."

"Some people didn't believe," said Tony, closing his hand tightly around a wad of tissues, watching his veins rise. "And some people hoped for the best."

"They said *God* would take us away," she murmured. She wrapped her hair around her fists as she talked. She looked at him, her eyes flashing in sharp little slits. "I *tried*. I *can't* believe in God. How could *they*? How could *anyone*?"

"My Mom believed," said Tony, placing the needle against his skin. "Probably will to the last second. If she's even still alive."

"I *killed* mine," she said.

"What?" Tony moved the needle away from his arm.

"My parents. On my thirteenth birthday. I slit their throats as they slept. The night the comet hit the moon."

"Jesus."

"I *should* have killed *myself*."

Tony sighed, and opened his hand. "Come here."

She shook her head.

"I think you need this more than I do," he said, holding the syringe toward her.

Her eyes fixed on it. She wiped her cheeks.

"It will help you," he said. "You still have a few minutes left."

She rolled to her knees, and crawled toward him, keeping her eyes fixed on the roof.

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"Here," he said, meeting her halfway, pushing up her sleeve.

He'd only used a needle on another person once before, long ago. But the skill came back easily enough. She gasped as he pushed the plunger in.

"Now breathe deep," he said.

It worked quickly, like he remembered. He rolled her over onto his lap, and she opened her eyes to the dance of the comets. He watched her as she watched the sky, for the longest time. He dared not look at his watch. If he didn't look at the watch, time would stand still. Eternities could be hidden between seconds. At last, she smiled.

"Mysteries," she whispered. "And *wonders*."

Tony lay back, lit a cigarette on the first try, and looked at the dark spaces between the comets. The black shapes curled like vast snakes. He recalled the boombox. He'd forgotten to play the music. But things don't always go as planned. A lifetime of practice won't keep the wire from snapping. When you fall, you relax, and let the net catch you. ○

COSMIC EGO

I kick Earth away
unbound, I'm the space-borne son
all attraction done

orbits drift astray
without me, Earth slides and slips
Newton's millstone scrapped

cackling, I adapt
coast on Kepler's ellipse
while stars dance with joy

new orbits entered
all Heaven's spheres re-centered
Aristotle's boy

who proves all Cosmos
spins at my whim: I, the soul
ruling paradigm

—Mike Allen

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AMBA

William Sanders

William Sanders is a semi-retired author who has been writing speculative fiction professionally since the 1980s. He first wrote a number of well-received novels and then turned to the short story, which he considers his strongest form. Many of his tales have appeared in this magazine, including the recent Nebula finalist "Dry Bones" (May 2003). We are delighted that Will came out of his semi-retirement to write the following story of the all-too-near future.

The client looked at his watch and then at Logan, raising an eyebrow. Logan nodded and spread his hands palm-down in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture. The client shook his head and went back to staring at the clearing below. His face was not happy.

Rather than let his own expression show, Logan turned his head and looked toward the other end of the blind, where Yura, the mixed-blood tracker, sat cross-legged with his old bolt-action Mosin rifle across his lap. Yura gave Logan a ragged steel-capped grin and after a moment Logan grinned back.

When he could trust his face again he turned back to look out the blind window. The sun was high now; yellow light angled down through the trees and dappled the ground. The early morning wind had died down and there was no sound except for the snuffling and shuffling of the half-grown pig tethered on the far side of the clearing.

The client was doing something with his camera. It was quite an expensive-looking camera; Logan didn't recognize the make. Now he was checking his damned watch again. Expensive watch, too. Definitely an upscale client. His name was Steen and he was an asshole.

Actually, Logan told himself without much conviction, Steen wasn't too bad, certainly not as bad as some of the other clients they'd had. He had a superior attitude, but then most of them did. But he was impatient, and that made him a real pain in the ass to have around, especially on a blind sit. All right, it was a little cramped inside the camouflaged tree blind, and you had to keep as still as possible; but all that had been explained to him

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in advance and if he had a problem with any of it he should have stayed back in Novosibirsk watching wildlife documentaries on television.

They'd been sitting there all morning, now, and maybe Steen thought that was too long. But hell, that was no time at all when you were waiting for a tiger, even on a baited site within the regular territory of a known individual.

Steen's shoulders lifted and fell in what was probably a silent sigh. At least he knew how to be quiet, you had to give him that much. Not like that silly son of a bitch last year, down in the Bikin valley, who made enough noise to scare off everything between Khabarovsk and Vladivostok and then demanded a refund because he hadn't gotten to—

Logan felt a sudden touch on his shoulder. He looked around and saw Yura crouching beside him, holding up a hand. The lips moved beneath the gray-streaked mustache, forming a silent word: "*Amba.*"

Logan looked out the blind window, following Yura's pointing finger, but he saw nothing. Heard nothing, either, nothing at all now; the pig had stopped rooting around and was standing absolutely still, facing in the same direction Yura was pointing.

Steen was peering out the window too, wide-eyed and clutching his camera. He glanced at Logan, who nodded.

And then there it was, padding out into the sunlit clearing in all its great burnt-orange magnificence.

Out of the corner of his eye, Logan saw Steen clap a hand over his mouth, no doubt to stifle a gasp. He didn't blame him; a male Amur tiger, walking free and untamed on his home turf, was a sight to take the breath of any man. As many times as he'd been through this, his own throat still went thick with awe for the first seconds.

The pig took an altogether different view. It began squealing and lunging desperately against its tether, its little terrified eyes fixed on the tiger, which had stopped now to look it over.

The client had his camera up to his face now, pressing the button repeatedly, his face flushed with excitement. Logan wondered if he realized just how lucky he was. This was one hell of a big tiger, the biggest in fact that Logan had ever seen outside a zoo. He guessed it would go as much as seven or eight hundred pounds and pretty close to a dozen feet from nose to tip of tail, though it was hard to be sure about the last now that the tail was rhythmically slashing from side to side as the tiger studied the pig.

If Steen was any good at all with that camera he ought to be getting some fine pictures. A bar of sunlight was falling on the tiger's back, raising glowing highlights on the heavy fur that was browner and more subdued than the flame-orange of a Bengal, the stripes less prominent, somehow making the beast look even bigger.

The tiger took a couple of hesitant, almost mincing steps, the enormous paws making no sound on the leaf mold. It might be the biggest cat in the world, but it was still a cat and it knew something wasn't quite right about this. It couldn't smell the three men hidden nearby, thanks to the mysterious herbal mixture with which Yura had dusted the blind, but it knew that pigs didn't normally show up out in the middle of the woods, tethered to trees.

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On the other hand, it was hungry.

It paused, the tail moving faster, and crouched slightly. The massive shoulder muscles bunched and bulged as it readied itself to jump—

Steen sneezed.

It wasn't all that much of a sneeze, really not much more than a snort, and Steen managed to muffle most of it with his hand. But it was more than enough. The tiger spun around, ears coming up, and looked toward the direction of the sound—for an instant Logan had the feeling that the great terrible eyes were looking straight into his—and then it was streaking across the clearing like a brush fire, heading back the way it had come. A moment later it was gone.

Behind him Logan heard Yura mutter, "*Govno.*"

"I'm sorry," Steen said stupidly. "I don't know why—"

"Sure." Logan shrugged. He heaved himself up off the little bench and half-stood, half-crouched in the low-roofed space. "Well, at least you got some pictures, didn't you?"

"I think so." Steen did something to his camera and a little square lit up on the back, showing a tiny colored picture. "Yes." He looked up at Logan, who was moving toward the curtained doorway at the rear of the blind. "Are we leaving now? Can't we wait, see if it comes back?"

"He won't," Logan said. "His kind got hunted almost to extinction, not all that long ago. He knows there are humans around. He's not going to risk it just for a pork dinner. Hell, you saw him. He hasn't been starving."

"Another one, perhaps—"

"No. Tigers are loners and they demand a hell of a lot of territory. A big male like that, he'll have easily fifty, a hundred square miles staked out. Maybe more."

They were speaking English; for some reason it was what Steen seemed to prefer, though his Russian was as good as Logan's.

"Now understand," Logan went on, "you've paid for a day's trip. If you want to stay and watch, you might get to see something else. Wolves for sure, soon as they hear that pig squealing. Maybe even a bear, though that's not likely. But you already saw a couple of bears, day before yesterday, and you said you'd seen wolves before."

"Yes. They are very common around Novosibirsk." Steen sighed. "I suppose you're right. May as well go back."

"All right, then." Logan started down the ladder and paused. The pig was still screaming. "Yura," he said tiredly in Russian, "for God's sake, shoot the damned pig."

A little while later they were walking down a narrow trail through the woods, back the way they had come early that morning. Logan brought up the rear, with Steen in front of him and Yura leading the way, the old Mosin cradled in his arms. Steen said, "I suppose he's got the safety on?"

Yura grunted. "Is not safe," he said in thickly accented but clear English, not looking around. "Is gun."

The back of Steen's neck flushed slightly. "Sorry," he said, "Really, I'm glad one of us is armed. With that animal out there somewhere."

Logan suppressed a snort. In fact he was far from sure that Yura would

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shoot a tiger, even an attacking one. To the Udege and the other Tungus tribes, *Amba* was a powerful and sacred spirit, almost a god, to be revered and under no circumstances to be harmed.

On the other hand, Yura was half Russian—unless you believed his story about his grandfather having been a Krim Tatar political prisoner who escaped from a gulag and took refuge in a remote Nanai village—and there was never any telling which side would prove dominant. Logan had always suspected it would come down to whether the tiger was attacking Yura or someone else.

The gun was mainly for another sort of protection. This was a region where people got up to things: dealers in drugs and stolen goods, animal poachers, army deserters, Chinese and Korean illegals and the people who transported them. You never knew what you might run into out in the back country; tigers were the least of the dangers.

The trail climbed up the side of a low but steep ridge covered with dense second-growth forest. The day was chilly, even with the sun up, and there were still a few small remnant patches of snow here and there under the trees, but even so Logan had to unzip his jacket halfway up the climb and he could feel the sweat starting under his shirt. At the top he called a rest break and he and Steen sat down on a log. Yura went over and leaned against a tree and took out his belt knife and began cleaning the blade on some leaves; despite Logan's order he'd cut the pig's throat rather than waste a valuable cartridge.

Steen looked at Logan. "You're American," he said, not making it a question. "If I may ask, how is it you come to be in this country?"

"I used to be in charge of security for a joint Russian-American pipeline company, up in Siberia."

"This was back before the warmup began?"

No, just before it got bad enough for people to finally admit it was happening. "Yes," Logan said.

"And you haven't been home since?"

"Home," Logan said, his voice coming out a little harsher than he intended, "for me, is a place called Galveston, Texas. It's been underwater for a couple of years now."

"Ah." Steen nodded. "I know how it is. Like you, I have nothing to go back to."

No shit, Logan thought, with a name like Steen. Dutch, or maybe Belgian; and what with the flooding, and the cold that had turned all of northwest Europe into an icebox after the melting polar ice deflected the Gulf Stream, the Low Countries weren't doing so well these days.

Steen would be one of the ones who'd gotten out in time, and who'd had the smarts and the resources and the luck—it would have taken all three—to get in on the Siberian boom as it was starting, before the stream of Western refugees became a flood and the Russians started slamming doors. And he must have been very successful at whatever he did; look at him now, already able to take himself a rich man's holiday in the Far East. Not to mention having the connections to get the required permits for this little adventure.

Logan stood up. "Come on," he said. "We need to get going."

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The trail dropped down the other side of the ridge, wound along beside a little stream, and came out on an old and disused logging road, its rutted surface already overgrown with weeds and brush. A relic from the bad old days, when outlaw logging outfits ran wild in the country south of the Amur and east of the Ussuri, clearcutting vast areas of supposedly protected forest with no more than token interference from the paid-off authorities, shipping the lumber out to the ever-hungry Chinese and Japanese markets.

It had been a hell of a thing; and yet, in the end, it hadn't made any real difference. The old taiga forest, that had survived so much for so many thousands of years, hadn't been able to handle the rising temperatures; the warmup had killed it off even faster and more comprehensively than the clearcutters had done.

But by then the markets had collapsed, along with the economies of the market countries; and the loggers had moved north to Siberia with its vast forests and its ravenous demand for lumber for the mushrooming new towns. Left alone, the clearcut areas had begun to cover themselves again, beginning with dense ground-hugging brush and then ambitious young saplings.

Which, to the deer population, had meant a jackpot of fresh, easily accessible browse; and pretty soon the deer were multiplying all over the place, to the delight of the tigers and bears and wolves that had been having a pretty thin time of it over the last couple of decades.

On the road there was enough room for Logan and Steen to walk side by side, though Yura continued to stride on ahead. Steen was quiet for a long time, and Logan had begun to hope he was going to stay that way; but then finally he spoke again:

"It was not much."

Startled, Logan said, "What?"

"It was not much," Steen repeated. "You must admit it was not much. A minute only. Not even a minute."

Logan got it then. Christ, he thought, he's been working himself up to this for better than three miles.

He said carefully, "Mr. Steen, you contracted with us to take you around this area and give you a chance to see and photograph wildlife. You'll recall the contract doesn't guarantee that you'll see a tiger. Only that we'll make our best effort to show you one. Which we did, and this morning you did see one."

Steen's face had taken on a stubborn, sullen look. "Legally you are correct," he said. "But still it doesn't seem right. For all I am paying you, it was not much."

"Mr. Steen," Logan said patiently, "you don't seem to know how lucky you've been. Some of our clients spend as much as a week, sitting in a blind every day, before they see a tiger. Some never do."

Steen was shaking his head. "Look," Logan said, "if you think you didn't see enough this morning, if you'd like to try again, we can set you up for another try. Add it onto your original package, shouldn't cost you too much more."

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Steen stared at Logan. "I will think about it," he said finally. "Perhaps. Still I don't think I should have to pay more, but perhaps. I will come to the office in the morning and let you know."

"Fine," Logan said. "I'm sure we can work out something reasonable."

Thinking: you son of a bitch. You smug rich son of a bitch with your God-damned fancy camera that someone needs to shove up your ass and your God-damned fancy watch after it. But he shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and kept walking, holding it in. The customer is always right.

A couple of hours later they came out onto a broad clear area at the top of a hill, where a short stocky man stood beside a big Mi-2 helicopter. He had a Kalashnikov rifle slung over his back.

"Logan," he called, and raised a hand. "*Zdrast'ye.*"

"Misha," Logan said. "Anything happening?"

"Nothing here. Just waiting for you, freezing my ass. Where is all this great warming I hear about?"

"Bullshit. Ten years ago, this time of year, you really would have been freezing your ass out here. You'd have been up to it in snow."

"Don't mind me, I'm just bitching," Misha said in English, and then, switching back to Russian, "How did it go? Did he get his tiger?"

Logan nodded, watching Steen climbing aboard the helicopter. Yura was standing nearby, having a lengthy pee against a tree. "So soon?" Misha said. "*Bozhe moi,* that was quick."

"Too quick." Steen was inside now and Logan didn't think he could hear them but he didn't really care anymore. He told Misha what had happened. "Don't laugh," he added quickly, seeing Steen watching them out a cabin window. "He's not very happy just now. Doesn't feel he got his money's worth."

"*Shto za chort?* What did he expect, tigers in a chorus line singing show tunes?" He glanced around. "What happened to the pig?"

"I had Yura kill it. Too much trouble dragging it all the way back here, and I couldn't very well leave the poor bastard tied there waiting for the wolves."

"Too bad. We could have taken it to Katya's, got her to roast it for us."

He unslung the Kalashnikov and handed it to Logan. "Take charge of this thing, please, and I'll see if I can get this old Mil to carry us home one more time."

"So," Misha said, "you think it was the same one? The big one, from last fall?"

"I think so," Logan said, pouring himself another drink. "Of course there's no way to know for sure, but the location's right and I can't imagine two males that big working that near to each other's territory."

It was late evening and they were sitting at a table in Katya's place in Khabarovsk. The room was crowded and noisy and the air was dense with tobacco smoke, but they had a place back in a corner away from the worst of it. There was a liter of vodka on the table between them. Or rather there was a bottle that had once contained a liter of vodka, its contents now substantially reduced.

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"In fact," Logan went on, "it's hard for me to imagine two males that big, period. If it's not the same one, if they're all getting that big, then I'm going to start charging more for screwing around with them."

Misha said, "This is good for us, you know. If we know we can find a big fine-looking cat like that, we'll get some business."

He scowled suddenly. "If some bastard doesn't shoot him. A skin that big would bring real money."

"The market's just about dried up," Logan said. "The Chinese have too many problems of their own to have much interest in pretty furs—drought and dust storms, half the country trying to turn into Mongolia—and the rich old men who thought extract of tiger dick would help them get it up again are too busy trying to hang onto what they've got. Or get out."

"All this is true." Misha nodded, his eyes slightly owlish; he had had quite a few by now. "But you know there are still those who have what it takes to get what they want. There always will be, in China or Russia or anywhere else." He grinned crookedly. "And a good thing for us, *da?*"

Logan took a drink and made a grimace of agreement. Misha was right; their most lucrative line of business depended on certain people being able to get what they wanted. Between the restrictions on aviation—Russia might be one of the few countries actually benefiting from atmospheric warming, but enough was enough—and those on travel within what was supposed to be a protected wilderness area, it was theoretically all but impossible to charter a private flight into the Sikhote-Alin country. There were, however, certain obviously necessary exceptions.

Logan said, "Come now, Misha. You know perfectly well all our clients are fully accredited scientific persons on essential scientific missions. It says so in their papers."

"*Konyechno.* I had forgotten. Ah, Russia, Russia." Misha drained his own glass and poured himself another one. "All those years we were poor, so we became corrupt. Now we are the richest country in the world, but the corruption remains. What is that English idiom? 'Force of hobbit.'"

"Habit."

"Oh, yes. Why do I always—"

He stopped, looking up at the man who was walking toward their table. "*Govno.* Look who comes."

Yevgeny Lavrushin, tall and skinny and beaky of nose, worked his way through the crowd, the tails of his long leather coat flapping about his denim-clad legs. He stopped beside their table and stuck out a hand toward Logan. "Say hey," he said. "Logan, my man. What's happening?"

He spoke English with a curious mixed accent, more Brooklyn than Russian. He had driven a cab in New York for a dozen years before the United States, in its rising mood of xenophobia, decided to terminate nearly all green cards. Now he lived here in Khabarovsk and ran a small fleet of trucks, doing just enough legitimate hauling to cover for his real enterprises. He was reputed to have mafia connections, but probably nothing very heavy.

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Logan ignored the hand. "Yevgeny," he said in no particular tone. "Something on your mind?"

"What the hell," Yevgeny said. "You gonna ask me to sit down?"

"No," Logan said. "What did you want?"

Yevgeny glanced theatrically around and then leaned forward and put his hands on the table. "Got a business proposition for you," he said in a lowered voice. "Serious money—"

"No," Logan said again, and then, more sharply as Yevgeny started to speak, "No, God damn it. *Nyet.* Whatever it is, we're not interested."

"Besides," Misha said in Russian, "since when do your usual customers travel by air? Did they get tired of being crammed like herring into the backs of your trucks?"

Yevgeny's coat collar jerked upward on his neck. "Christ, don't talk that shit. . . ." He glanced around again. "Look, it's not Chinks, okay? Well, yeah, in a way it is, but—"

"Yevgeny," Logan said, "it's been a hell of a long day. Go away."

"Hey, I can dig it. I'm gone." He started to move away and then turned back, to lean over the table again. "One other thing. You guys know where there's some big tigers, right? If you ever need to make some quick money, I know where you can get a hell of a good price for a clean skin—"

Logan started to stand up. "Okay, okay." Yevgeny held up both hands and began backing away. "Be cool, man. If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

"Yeah," Logan muttered as he disappeared into the crowd. "Just start turning over rocks . . . hand me the bottle, Misha, I need another one now."

"Wonder what he wanted," Misha mused. "As far as I know, his main business is running Chinese illegals. You suppose he's branched out into drugs or something?"

"Doesn't matter." Logan finished pouring and looked around for the cap to the vodka bottle. "I don't even want to know . . . well, this has to be my last one. Have to deal with Steen tomorrow," he said, screwing the cap down tightly, "and I definitely don't want to do that with a hangover."

But Steen didn't show up the following morning.

"He hasn't been here," Lida Shaposhnikova told Logan when he came in. "I came in early, about eight-thirty, so I could have his account ready, and he never showed up."

Logan checked his watch. "It's not even ten yet. He probably slept late or something. We'll wait."

The office occupied the front room of a run-down little frame house on the outskirts of Khabarovsk, not far from the airport. The office staff consisted entirely of Lida. The back rooms were mostly full of outdoor gear and supplies—camping kit, camouflage fabric for blinds, night-vision equipment, and so on—and various mysterious components with which Misha somehow managed to keep the old helicopter flying. The kitchen was still a kitchen. Logan went back and poured himself a cup of coffee and took it to his desk and sat down to wait, while Lida returned to whatever she was doing on her computer.

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But a couple of hours later, with noon approaching and still no sign of Steen, Logan said, "Maybe you should give him a call. Ask him when he's planning to come."

He got up and walked out onto the front porch for a bit of fresh air. When he went back inside, Lida said, "I phoned his hotel. He checked out this morning at nine."

"Shit. You better call—"

"I already did." Lida leaned back in her chair and looked at him with dark oblong eyes, a legacy from her Korean grandmother. "He left on the morning flight to Novosibirsk."

"Son of a bitch," Logan said in English.

"So it would seem," Lida said in the same language.

"Well." Logan rubbed his chin. "Well, go ahead and figure up his bill and charge him. You've already got his credit card number, from when he paid his deposit."

Lida nodded and turned to the computer. A few minutes later she muttered something under her breath and began tapping keys rapidly, as the front door opened and Misha came in.

"*Sukin syn,*" he said when Logan told him what was going on. "He's run out on us?"

"It's all right," Logan said. He nodded toward the front desk, where Lida was now talking to someone on the phone. "We'll just charge it to his credit—"

"No we won't." Lida put down the phone and turned around. "The credit card's no good. He's canceled it."

"He can do that?" Misha said. "Just like that?"

"He did it yesterday," Lida said. "He paid his bill at the hotel with a check."

Everyone said bad words in several languages. Misha said, "He can't get away with that, can he?"

"Legally, no. In the real world—" Logan shrugged heavily. "He's got to be connected. You know how hard it is to do anything to someone who's connected. We can try, but I don't think much of our chances."

"At the very best," Lida said, "it's going to take a long time. Which we don't have." She waved a hand at the computer. "I've been looking at the numbers. They're not good."

"Got some more costs coming up, too," Misha put in. "We're overdue on our fuel bill at the airport, and the inspector wants to know why he hasn't gotten his annual present yet. I was just coming to tell you."

"Hell." Logan felt like kicking something. Or someone. "I was counting on that money to get us off the hook. Well, I'll just have to get busy and find us another job."

There was a short silence. Logan and Misha looked at each other.

Misha said, "We could—"

"No we couldn't," Logan said.

But of course they were going to.

Yevgeny said, "Like I tried to tell you before, it's not Chinks. I mean, it's *Chinamen,* but it's not your regular coolies coming north looking for work

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and a square meal. These are high-class Chinamen, you know? Some kind of suits. The kind you don't just cram into the back of a truck behind a load of potatoes."

"Sounds political," Logan said. "No way in hell, if it is."

"No, no, nothing like that. This is—" Yevgeny hunched his bony shoulders. "I'll be straight with you guys, I don't really know *what* the fuck it's all about, but it can't be political. The people who want it done, that's just not their thing."

Which meant mafia, which meant Yevgeny was blowing a certain amount of smoke, because in Russia nowadays the concepts of mafia and political were not separable. This was starting to feel even worse.

Misha said, "I'll tell you right now, I'm not flying into Chinese airspace. Money's no good to a man with a heat-seeking missile up his ass."

"That's okay. See, there's this island in the river—"

"The Ussuri?" Logan said skeptically. The Ussuri islands were military and heavily fortified; there had been some border incidents with the Chinese.

"No, man, the Amur. Way to hell west of here, I'll show you on the map, they gave me the coordinates and everything. It's just a little island, not much more than a big sandbar. On the Russian side of the channel, but nobody gives a shit either way, there's nothing much around there, not even any real roads."

His fingers made diagrams on the tabletop. "You guys set down there, there'll be a boat from the Chinese side. Five Chinamen get out, you pick them up and you're outta there. You drop them off at this point on the main highway, out in the middle of nowhere. There'll be some people waiting."

"Sounds like they've got this all worked out," Logan said. "So why do they need us? I'd expect people like that to have their own aircraft."

"They did. They had this chopper lined up for the job, only the pilot made some kind of mistake on the way here and spread himself all over this field near Blagoveshchensk. So they got hold of me and asked could I line up somebody local."

"Yevgeny," Logan said, "if this goes wrong you better hope I don't make it back, because I'm going to be looking for you."

"If this goes wrong, you won't be the only one. These people," Yevgeny said very seriously, "they're not people you want to fuck with. Know what I'm saying?"

Lida said, "I wish I knew what you're getting mixed up in. Or perhaps I don't. It doesn't matter. You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Mhmph," Logan replied, or sounds to that effect. His face was partly buried in his pillow. He was about half asleep and trying to do something about the other half if only Lida would quit talking.

"I talk with Katya, you know," she went on. "We've known each other for years. She's seen you with Yevgeny Lavrushin."

Logan rolled onto his back, looking up into the darkness of the bedroom. "It's nothing. Just a quick little flying job."

"Of course. A quick little flying job for which you will be paid enough to

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get the company out of debt. You can't help being a fool," she said, "but I wish you wouldn't take me for one."

She moved closer and put out a hand to stroke his chest. "Look at us. You need me more than you love me. I love you more than I need you. Somehow it works out," she said. "I'm not complaining. Only don't lie to me."

There was nothing to say to that.

"So," she said, "at least tell me when this is to happen."

"Tomorrow night. Wha—" he said as her hand moved lower.

"Then I'd better get some use out of you," she said, "before you get yourself killed or imprisoned."

"Lida," he protested, "I'm really tired."

She slid a long smooth leg over him and moved it slowly up and down his body. "No you're not. Maybe you think you are, but you're not. Not yet. See there," she said, rising up, straddling him, fitting herself to him, "you're not tired at all."

Logan's watch said it was almost one in the morning. He shivered slightly as a chilly breeze came in off the river.

Not too many years ago, at this time of year, the river would have carried big floes of ice from the spring thaw; but now there was only the smooth dark water sliding past in the dim light of a low crescent moon, and, away beyond that, a dark smudge that was the distant China shore.

The island was about half a mile long and maybe fifty or sixty feet across. As Yevgeny had said, it wasn't much more than a big sandbar. The upstream end was littered with brush and washed-up dead trees, but the other end was clear and open and flat in the middle, with plenty of room for the Mil.

He dropped his hand to the butt of the Kalashnikov and hefted it slightly, easing the pressure of the sling against his shoulder. Beside him, Misha squatted on the sand, his face grotesquely masked by bulky night goggles. "Nothing yet," Misha said.

"It's not quite time."

"I know. I just don't like this waiting."

Logan knew what was eating Misha. He hadn't wanted to shut down the Mil's engines; he'd wanted to be ready to take off fast if anything went wrong. But it wouldn't have done any good; as Logan had already pointed out, with those twin Isotov turbines idling they'd never hear a border patrol unit approaching until it was too late to run for it, and, after all, where would they run to?

Somewhere on the Russian side of the river a wolf howled, and was joined by others. Standing in the shadows nearby, Yura said something in a language that wasn't Russian, and chuckled softly.

"Wolves all over the place these days," Misha said. "More than I've ever seen before. I wonder what they're eating. I know, the deer population is up, but I wouldn't think that would be enough."

"It's been enough for the tigers," Logan pointed out.

"True . . . speaking of tigers," Misha said, "I've been thinking. Maybe we ought to start giving that big male some special attention, you know?

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Take a pig or a sheep or something down there every now and then, get him used to visiting that clearing. A tiger that size, he's money in the bank for us if we can count on him showing up for the clients."

"Hm. Not a bad idea."

"Have Yura put out some of his secret tiger bait powder." Misha dropped his voice. "You think that stuff really works?"

"Who knows?" Logan wished Misha would shut up but he realized he was talking from nerves. "Could be."

"Those tribesmen know things," Misha said. "Once I saw—"

He stopped. "Something happening over there." He reached up and made a small adjustment to the night goggles. "Can't really see anything," Misha added. "Something that could be a vehicle, with some people moving around. Can't even be sure how many."

A small red light flashed briefly on the far shore, twice. Logan took the little flashlight from his jacket pocket and pointed it and flicked the switch three times in quick succession.

Misha said, "*Shto za chort?* Oh, all right, they're carrying something down to the river. Maybe a boat."

Logan wished he'd brought a pair of goggles for himself. Or a night scope. He listened but there was no sound but the night breeze and the barely audible susurrus of the current along the sandy shore. Even the wolves had gone quiet.

"Right, it's a boat," Misha said. "Coming this way."

Logan slipped the Kalashnikov's sling off his shoulder, hearing a soft *flunk* as Yura slid a round into the chamber of his rifle.

Misha stood up and slipped off the goggles. "I better go get the Mil warmed up."

A few minutes later Logan saw it, a low black shape moving toward the island. There was still no sound. Electric motor, he guessed. As it neared the bank he saw that two men stood in the bow holding some sort of guns. He reached for the Kalashnikov's safety lever, but then they both slung their guns across their backs and jumped out into the shallows and began pulling the big inflatable up onto the sand.

Several dark figures stood up in the boat and began moving rather awkwardly toward the bow, where the two men gave them a hand climbing down. When the fifth one was ashore the two gunmen pushed the boat back free of the shore and climbed back aboard while the passengers walked slowly across the sand to where Logan stood.

The first one stopped in front of Logan. He was tall and thin and bespectacled, wearing a light-colored topcoat hanging open over a dark suit. In his left hand he carried a medium-sized travel bag.

"Good evening," he said in accented Russian. "I am Doctor Fong—"

"I don't want to know who you are," Logan told him. "I don't want to know anything I don't need to know. You're in charge of this group?"

"I suppose. In a sense—"

"Good. Get your people on board." Logan jerked the Kalashnikov's muzzle in the direction of the helicopter, which was already emitting a high, whistling whine, the long rotor blades starting to swing.

The tall man nodded and turned and looked back at the boat and said

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something in Chinese. The boat began to move backward. The tall man spoke again and the others moved quickly to follow him toward the Mil, lugging their bags and bundles.

"Let's go," Logan told Yura. "*Davai poshli.*"

Off down the river the wolves were howling again.

The road was a dark streak in the moonlight, running roughly east-west, across open plain and through dense patches of forest. There was no traffic in sight, nor had Logan expected any. This had been one of the last stretches of the Trans-Siberian Highway to be completed, but the pavement was already deteriorating, having been badly done to begin with and rarely maintained since; very few people cared to drive its ruinously potholed surface at night.

"Should be right along here," Logan said, studying the map Yevgeny had given them. "That's the third bridge after the village, isn't it?"

Beside him, Misha glanced out the side window at the ground flickering past beneath. "I think so."

"Better get lower, then."

Misha nodded and eased down on the collective. As the Mil settled gently toward the road Logan felt around the darkened cockpit and found the bag with the night goggles. The next part should be straightforward, but with people like this you couldn't assume anything.

Misha leveled off a little above treetop level. "If there's one thing I hate worse than flying at night," he grumbled, "it's flying low at night . . . isn't that something up ahead?"

Logan started to put on the night goggles. As he was slipping them over his head a set of headlights flashed twice down on the highway, maybe a quarter of a mile away.

"That should be them," he told Misha. "Make a low pass, though, and let's have a look."

Misha brought the helicopter down even closer to the road, slowing to the speed of a cautiously driven car, while Logan wrestled the window open and stuck his head out. The slipstream caught the bulky goggles and tried to jerk his head around, but he fought the pressure and a few seconds later he saw the car, parked in the middle of the road, facing east. He caught a glimpse of dark upright shapes standing nearby, and then it all disappeared from view as the Mil fluttered on up the road.

"Well?" Misha said.

Logan started to tell him it was all right, to come around and go back and land; but then something broke surface in his mind and he said, "No, wait. Circle around and come back up the road the same way. Take it slow so I can get a better look."

Misha kicked gently at the pedals and eased the cyclic over, feeding in power and climbing slightly to clear a stand of trees. "*Shto eto?*"

"I'm not sure yet." Something hadn't looked right, something about the scene down on the road that didn't add up, but Logan couldn't get a handle on it yet. Maybe it was just his imagination.

They swung around in a big circle and came clattering back up the road. Again the double headlight flash, this time slower and longer. "Slow,

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now," Logan said, pulling the goggles down again and leaning out the window. "All right . . . that's it, go on."

He pulled off the goggles and closed his eyes, trying to project the scene like a photograph inside his head: the dark shape of a medium-sized car in the middle of the road, flanked by a couple of human figures. Another man—or woman—standing over by the right side of the road.

"Shit," Logan said, and opened his eyes and turned around and looked back between the seats. "Hey. You. Doctor Fong."

"Yes?" The tall Chinese leaned forward. "Something is wrong?"

"These people you're meeting," Logan said. "They know how many of you there are?"

"Oh, yes." Reddish light from the instrument panel glinted off glasses lenses as Fong nodded vigorously. "They know our names and . . . everything, really. This is certain."

"What's happening?" Misha wanted to know.

"Three men in sight, back there," Logan said, turning back around. "At least one more in the car, operating the headlights. Five men expected."

"So?"

"So that's not a very big car to hold nine men. You could do it, but it would be a circus act. Which raises some questions."

"Huh." Misha digested this. "What do you think?"

"I think we better find out more." He thought for a moment. "All right, here's how we'll do it. Set her down right up here, past that rise, just long enough for me to get out. Then circle around a little bit, like you're confused, you know? Make some noise to cover me while I move in and have a look."

He tapped the comm unit in the pocket on his left jacket sleeve. "I'll give you a call if it's all right to land. If I send just a single long beep, come in as if you're going to land and then hit the landing lights."

"Got it," Misha said. "Taking Yura?"

"Of course. Right, then." Logan undid the seat harness and levered himself out of the right seat. As he clambered back into the passenger compartment, Doctor Fong said, "Please, what is the matter?"

"I don't know yet." Logan worked his way between the close-spaced seats to the rear of the cabin, where Yura sat next to the door. "Don't worry," he said over his shoulder, hoping Fong couldn't see him getting out the Kalashnikov. "It's probably nothing."

Misha brought the Mil down and held it in a low hover, its wheels a few feet above the pavement, long enough for Logan and Yura to jump out. As Logan's boots hit the cracked asphalt he flexed his knees to absorb the impact and almost immediately heard the rotor pitch change as Misha pulled up on the collective to lift out of there.

Yura came up beside him and Logan made a quick hand signal. Yura nodded and ran soundlessly across the road and disappeared into the shadows beneath the trees on the right side. Logan walked back along the road until he reached the top of the little rise and then moved off the pavement to the left.

The cover was poor on that side, the trees thin and scattered, with

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patches of brush that made it hard to move quietly. Logan guessed it was about a mile back to where the car was parked. Moving slowly and carefully, holding the Kalashnikov high across his chest, he worked his way along parallel to the road. The night goggles were pushed up on his forehead; they were too clumsy for this sort of thing, and anyway he could see all right now. The moon was higher and the clouds had blown away, and his eyes had adjusted to the weak light.

The Mil came back overhead, turbines blaring and rotor blades clop-clopping, heading back down the road. It swung suddenly off to one side, turned back and crossed the road, did a brief high hover above the trees, and then began zigzagging irregularly along above the highway. Logan grinned to himself; whoever was waiting down the road must be getting pretty baffled by now. Not to mention pissed off.

He thought he must be getting close, and he was about to move over by the road to check; but then here came the Mil again, coming back up the road maybe twenty feet up, and suddenly there was a bright light shining through the trees, closer than he'd expected, as the car headlights flashed again.

He stopped and stood very still. As the sound of the helicopter faded on up the road behind him, he heard a man's voice say quite distinctly, *"Ah, yob tvoiu mat'."*

He waited until the Mil began to circle back, so its noise would cover any sounds that he made. A few quick steps and he stood beside the road, pressed up against an inadequate pine. He slipped the night goggles down over his eyes and leaned cautiously out, feeling his sphincter pucker.

There they were, just as he remembered: the two men standing on either side of the car, and another one over by the far side of the road. All three of them, he saw now, were holding weapons: some sort of rifles or carbines, he couldn't make out any details.

He pushed the goggles back up, slung the Kalashnikov over his shoulder, and took the comm unit from his pocket and switched it on and pressed a single key. He held it down for a count of five, switched the unit off, slipped it back into his pocket, and unslung the Kalashnikov again.

The Mil came racketing up the road once more, slowing down as the headlights flashed again. Logan stepped out from behind the tree and began moving quickly along next to the road, not trying to be stealthy; by now these bastards wouldn't be paying attention to anything but the helicopter with the impossible pilot.

It was moving now at bicycle speed, and then even slower. When it was no more than twenty feet in front of the parked car it stopped in a low hover. Logan stopped too, and pushed the Kalashnikov's fire selector to full automatic as Misha hit the landing lights.

The sudden glare threw the scene into harsh contrast, like a black-and-white photograph. One of the men beside the car threw a forearm over his face. Someone cursed.

Logan raised the Kalashnikov and took a deep breath. "Everyone stand still!" he shouted over the rotor noise. "Put down the weapons!"

For a second he thought it was going to work. The men on the road froze in place, like so many window dummies. Logan had just enough

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time to wonder what the hell he was going to do with them, and then it all came apart.

The man over on the far side of the road started to turn, very fast, the gun in his hands coming up and around. There was a deafening *blang* and he jerked slightly, dropped his rifle, and fell to the pavement.

While the sound of Yura's rifle was still rattling off through the trees the two men by the car made their play, moving simultaneously and with purposeful speed. The nearer one took a long step to one side and whirled around, dropping into a crouch, while the other dived to the ground and started to roll toward the cover of the car.

Logan got the farther one in mid-roll and then swung the Kalashnikov toward the remaining one. A red eye winked at him and something popped through the bushes, not very close; the gunman had to be shooting blind, his eyes still trying to catch up to the sudden changes in the light. Backlit by the landing lights, he was an easy-meat target; Logan cut him down with a three-shot burst to the chest.

The car door opened and someone stepped out. Yura's old rifle boomed again from the trees across the road. Four down.

Logan walked slowly toward the car, the Kalashnikov ready. A man lay beside the open door, a machine pistol in one hand. Logan looked in and checked the interior of the car.

He took the comm unit out and flicked it on again. "All right, Misha," he said. "You can set her down now."

He walked over to the body of the last man he had killed and studied the weapon that lay beside the body. A Dragunov sniper rifle, fitted with what looked like a night scope. Definitely some professional talent, whoever they were.

He went back and sat down on the hood of the car, for want of any better place, while Misha set the helicopter down. He noticed with disgust that his hands were starting to tremble slightly.

Yura came up, his rifle over his shoulder and what looked like a Kalashnikov in one hand. "Sorry I was so slow on that last one," he said. He raised the Kalashnikov and gestured with his free hand at the body on the far side of the road. "This is what he had."

"Then for God's sake get rid of it." Remembering, Logan cleared the chamber of his own rifle and slung it over his back. For the first time in a long time he wished he hadn't quit smoking.

The Mil's rotor blades were slowing, the turbine whine dropping to idle. A couple of minutes later Misha came walking toward the car. "*Bozhe moi,*" he said, staring. "What—?"

"Reception committee," Logan said. "Had a nice little ambush set up. At least that's how it looks."

Misha was looking around dazedly. "You're sure?"

"About the ambush, not entirely. It's possible they were going to let the passengers disembark and wait for us to leave before killing them. Hell," Logan said, "just look at the kind of firepower they were carrying. I don't think it was because they were afraid of wolves."

Yura was going over the car. "Couple of shovels in the trunk," he reported. "Some wire, some tape."

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"See?" Logan turned his head and spat; his mouth felt very dry. "They weren't planning on taking anyone anywhere. Not any farther than a short walk in the woods."

The Chinese men were getting out of the helicopter now, stopping in front of the nose and staring at the car and the bodies. Misha cursed. "I told them to stay inside—"

"It's all right," Logan said. "Doesn't matter now."

Doctor Fong appeared, walking toward them. He didn't look happy, Logan thought, but he didn't look all that surprised either.

Logan said, "I don't suppose you have any idea what this was all about?"

Fong stopped beside the car and looked around. "Perhaps," he said. "I—let me think."

"Don't think too long," Logan said. "We've got to get out of here."

"Yes." He looked at Logan. "Do you speak English?"

"After a fashion."

"Aha." Fong's mouth quirked in a brief half-smile. "An American. Good. My English is much better than my Russian."

He pushed his glasses up on his nose with the tip of a slender finger. They weren't slipping; Logan guessed it was a nervous habit. He made a gesture that took in the car and the bodies. "Can we perhaps move away from. . . ?"

"Sure." Logan slid off the car and walked with Fong over to the side of the road. "I just need to know," he said, "what kind of trouble this is about. If you guys are anything political—"

"Oh, no." Fong stopped and turned to face him. "No, we're not, as you put it, political at all. Merely a group of harmless scientists."

"Some pretty heavy people trying to stop you," Logan said. "Someone must not think you're so harmless."

"Yes, well. . . ." Fong looked off into the darkness under the trees and then back at Logan. "You saved our lives just now," he said in a different tone. "This is a debt we can hardly repay, but there's something I can give you in return. Some information."

"Scientific information?"

"Yes." If Fong noticed the sarcasm he didn't show it. He pushed his glasses up again. "It's the warming."

It took a moment for Logan to realize what he was talking about. The adrenalin edge had worn off; he felt tired and old.

"It's still getting warmer," Fong said. "I'm sure you already knew that, it's hardly a secret. But—" He paused, his forehead wrinkling. "The curve," he said. "I couldn't remember the word . . . the curve is different from what has been thought."

His forefinger drew an upward-sweeping curve in the air. "The warming is about to accelerate. It's going to start getting warmer at an increasing rate, and—I'm not sure how to say this—the rate of increase will itself increase."

"It's going to get warmer faster?"

Fong nodded. "Oh, you won't notice any real change for some time to come. Perhaps as much as two to five years, no one really knows as yet . . .

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but then," the fingertip began to rise more steeply, "the change will be very rapid indeed."

"You mean—"

"Wait, that's not all. The other part," Fong said, "is that it's likely to go on longer than anyone thought. The assumption has been that the process has all but run its course, that a ceiling will soon be reached. It's not clear, now, just where the ceiling is. Or even if there is one, in any practical sense."

Logan's ears registered the words, but his fatigue-dulled brain was having trouble keeping up. "It's going to keep getting warmer," he said, "it's going to do it faster and faster, and it's going to get a hell of a lot warmer than it is now. That's what you're saying?"

"Even so."

"But that's going to mean . . . Christ." Logan shook his head, starting to see it. "Christ," he said again helplessly, stupidly. "Oh, Christ."

"You might well call on him, if you believe in him," Fong said. "If I believed in any gods I would call on them too. Things are going to be very, very bad."

"As if they weren't bad enough already."

"Yes indeed. I don't know how long you've been in this part of the world, but I'm sure you've heard at least some of the news from other regions."

"Pretty bad in China, I hear."

"You have no idea. Believe me, it is much, much worse than anything you can have heard. The government keeps very strict control over the flow of information. Even inside China, it's not always possible to know what's happening in the next province."

Fong put out a hand and touched the rough bark of the nearest pine. "You live in one of the few remaining places that have been relatively unharmed by the global catastrophe. A quiet, pleasant backwater of a large country grown suddenly prosperous—but all that is about to end."

He gave a soft short laugh with absolutely no amusement in it. "You think the Russian Federation has a problem with desperate Chinese coming across the border *now*? Just wait, my friend. Already the level of desperation in my country is almost at the critical point. When people realize that things are getting even worse, they will begin to move and it will take more than border posts and patrols, and even rivers, to stop them."

Logan started to speak, but his throat didn't seem to be working so well.

"Your American journalists and historians," Fong added, "used to write about the Chinese military using 'human wave' attacks. This frontier is going to see a human tsunami."

Logan said, "You're talking war, aren't you?

"Of one kind or another." Fong fingered his glasses. "I really am not qualified to speculate in that area. All I'm telling you is that this is about to become a very bad place to live."

"Thanks for the warning."

"As I say, you saved our lives. In my case, you probably saved me from worse." Fong turned and looked back at the scene in the middle of the road, where the other Chinese were still milling around the car and the

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bodies. "I suspect they meant to question me. That would not have been pleasant."

Logan said, "So what was all this about? Since when is the mafia interested in a bunch of physicists or climatologists or whatever you are?"

"What?" Fong looked startled. He pushed his glasses up again and then he smiled. "Oh, I see. You misunderstand. None of us is that sort of scientist. No, our field is chemistry. Pharmaceutical chemistry," he said. "Which *is* of interest to . . . certain parties."

Logan nodded. It didn't take a genius to figure that one out.

"The information I just gave you," Fong went on, "has nothing to do with my own work. I got it from my elder brother, who was one of the team that made the breakthrough. He told me all about it, showed me the figures—it's not really difficult, anyone with a background in the physical sciences could understand it—just before they took him away."

"Took him away? What for? Oh," Logan said. "This is something the Chinese government wants to keep the lid on."

"That is a way to put it."

"And that's why you decided to get the hell out?"

"Not really. We've been working on this for some time. We had already made contact with the, ah, relevant persons. But I admit the news acted as a powerful incentive."

"And this business here tonight?"

Fong shrugged. "The so-called Russian mafia is no more than a loose confederacy of factions and local organizations. I would assume someone got wind of the plan and, for whatever reason, decided to stop us. Possibly rivals of the ones who were going to employ us. But that's only a guess."

He made a face. "I am not happy about being involved with people like this, but I would have done anything to get out of China. And I can't imagine myself as an underpaid illegal laborer on some construction project along the Lena or the Yenesei."

Logan nodded again. "Okay, well, we'd better get moving. What do you guys want to do? We can't very well take you back to Khabarovsk with us, but—"

"Oh, we'll be all right. The car appears to be undamaged—that really was remarkable shooting—and one of my colleagues is a very expert driver. We have contacts we can call on," Fong said, "telephone numbers, a safe address in Belogorsk."

Logan noticed that a couple of the Chinese men were examining the dead men's weapons, handling them in quite a knowledgeable way. Some scientists. He wondered what the rest of the story was. Never know, of course. What the hell.

"So you may as well be going." Fong put out a hand. "Thank you again."

Logan took it. "Don't mention it," he said. "A satisfied customer is our best advertisement."

"So," Misha said, "you think it's true?"

"Right now," Logan said, "I don't know what the hell I think about anything."

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By now they were about three quarters of the way back to Khabarovsk. The moon was well up in the sky and the Trans-Siberian Highway was clearly visible below the Mil's nose. Perfect conditions for IFR navigation: I Follow Roads. Back in the cabin, Yura was sound asleep.

"He could have been making the whole thing up," Misha said. "But why?"

"People don't necessarily need a reason to lie. But," Logan said, "considering the situation, I don't know why he'd want to waste time standing around feeding me a line."

"Those people," Misha said, centuries of prejudice in his voice. "Who can tell?"

"Well, if Fong was right, there's going to be a hell of a lot of 'those people' coming north in another couple of years—maybe sooner—and then it's going to get nasty around here. Even if Fong's story was 90 percent bullshit," Logan said, "we're still looking at big trouble. Those poor bastards have got to be pretty close to the edge already, from all I've heard. If things get even a little bit worse—" He turned and looked at Misha. "I think we don't want to be here when it happens."

Misha sighed heavily. "All right. I see what you mean."

In the distance the lights of Khabarovsk had begun to appear. Logan looked at the fuel gauges. They'd cut it a little close tonight; they wouldn't be running on fumes by the time they got home, but they'd certainly be into the reserve.

Misha said, "Where are you going to go, then?"

"Hell, I don't know." Logan rubbed his eyes, wishing they'd brought along a Thermos of coffee. "Back up north, maybe."

"Ever think of going back to America?"

"Not really. Actually I'm not even sure they'd let me back in. I've lived outside the country almost twenty years now, and anything over five automatically gets you on the National Security Risk list. Anyway," Logan said, "things have gone to hell in the States, and not just from the weather and the flooding. It's been crazy back there for a long time. Even before I left."

Misha said, "Canada, then?"

"Canada's harder than this country to get into, these days. Especially for people from the States. Alaska, now," Logan said thoughtfully, "that might be a possibility. They say the secessionists are paying good money for mercenaries. But I'm getting a little old for that."

"You weren't too old tonight." He could just make out the pale flash of Misha's grin in the darkness. "Man, I'd forgotten how good you are."

"Bullshit. No, I think it's Siberia again, if I decide to pull out. I know some people from the old days, we've kept in touch. You want to come along? Always work for a good pilot."

"Maybe. I'll think about it. We had some pretty good times in Siberia in the old days, didn't we? And now it wouldn't be so damned cold."

Khabarovsk was coming into view now, a sprawl of yellow lights stretching north from the river. Moonlight glinted softly off the surface of the Amur, limning the cluster of islands at the confluence with the Ussuri.

"Going to take Lida with you?" Misha asked.

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"I don't know." Logan hadn't thought about it. "Maybe. If she wants to come. Why not?"

He sat upright in his seat and stretched as best he could in the confined space. "You understand," he said, "I haven't made up my mind yet. I'm not going to do anything until I've had time to think this over."

He stared ahead at the lights of Khabarovsk. "Right now I've got more urgent matters to take care of. Starting with a long private talk with Yevgeny."

But next day everything got crazy and there was no time to think about Yevgeny or the Chinese or anything else. A perfectly legitimate scientific expedition, some sort of geological survey team, called up from Komsomolsk in urgent need of transportation services, their pilot having gotten drunk and disappeared for parts unknown with their aircraft.

And so, for the next couple of weeks, life was almost unbearably hectic, though profitable. Logan was too preoccupied to pay much attention to anything but the most immediate concerns; he barely listened when Yura came in to say that he was taking off for a few days to check out something he'd heard about.

But at last the job was finished and life began to return to a less lunatic pace; and it was then, just as Logan was starting to think once again about old and new business, that Yura showed up at the office saying he'd found something Logan ought to see.

"You come," he said. "I have to show you."

There was something in his face that forestalled arguments or objections. Logan said, "Will we need the Mil?"

Yura nodded. Logan said, "All right. Let's go find Misha."

"Well," Misha said in a strangled voice, "now we know what the wolves have been eating."

Logan didn't reply. He was having too much trouble holding the contents of his stomach down.

"Bears too," Yura said, and pointed at the nearest body with the toe of his boot. "See? Teeth marks too big for wolves."

There were, Logan guessed, between fifteen and twenty bodies lying about the clearing. It was difficult to be sure because some had been dragged over into the edge of the forest and most had been at least partly dismembered.

"Tigers, some places," Yura added. "Not this one, though."

"How many?" Logan managed to get out. "Places, I mean."

"Don't know. Eleven so far, that I found. Probably more. I quit looking." Yura's face wrinkled into a grimace of disgust. "Some places, lots worse than this. Been there too long, you know? Gone rotten, bad smell—"

"Yes, yes," Logan said hastily, feeling his insides lurch again. "I'll take your word for it."

The smell was bad enough here, though the bodies didn't appear to be badly decomposed yet. At least it was still too early in the year for the insects to be out in strength. In a few more weeks—he pushed the picture out of his mind. Or tried to.

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"And these places," Misha said, "they're just scattered around the area?"

Yura nodded. "Mostly just off old logging roads, like here. Always about the same number of Chinese."

Logan wondered how he could tell. The bodies he could see were just barely recognizable as human.

"They came up the logging road," Yura said, pointing. "One truck, not very big, don't know what kind. Stopped by those trees and everyone got out. They all walked down the trail to right over there. Chinese all lined up, facing that way, and knelt down. Four men stood a little way behind them and shot them in the back. Kalashnikovs." He held up a discolored cartridge case. "Probably shooting full automatic. Some of the Chinese tried to run. One almost made it to the woods before they got him."

Misha was looking skeptical; probably he wondered if Yura could really tell all that just by looking at the signs on the ground. Logan didn't. He'd seen Yura at work enough times in the past.

"Did it the same way every place," Yura added.

"Same truck too?"

"Couldn't tell for sure. A couple of places, I think so."

"Poor bastards," Misha said. "Packed in the back of a truck, getting slammed around on a dirt road, probably half starved—they'd be dizzy and weak, confused, easy to push around. Tell them to line up and kneel down, they wouldn't give you any trouble."

"One place," Yura said, "looked like some of the Chinese tried to fight back. Didn't do them any good."

"Your people," Logan said, "they knew about this?"

"Someone knew something. Stories going around, that's how I heard. Not many villages left around here," Yura said. "Most of the people moved out back when they started the logging. Or the loggers drove them out."

"Any idea how long it's been going on?"

"From what I heard, from the way the bodies looked at a couple of places," Yura said, "maybe a year."

Logan and Misha looked at each other.

"I think," Logan said, "there's someone we should go see."

"Chinks?" Yevgeny Lavrushin said incredulously. "This is about fucking *Chinks?*"

He rubbed the back of his hand against the raw spot on his face, where Yura had peeled the duct tape off his mouth. He did it clumsily; his wrists were still taped together.

Beside him in the back seat of the car, Logan said, "Not entirely. We were already planning to have a talk with you."

"Hey," Yevgeny said, "I don't blame you guys for being pissed off, I'd be pissed off too. I swear I didn't know it was going to get fucked up like that."

His voice was higher than usual and his words came out very fast. There was a rank smell of fear-sweat coming off him, so strong Logan was tempted to open a window despite the chill of the early-morning air.

"There's a *lot* of people pissed off about what happened," he said. "Some pretty *heavy* people. If they thought I had anything to do with what went

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down that night, I wouldn't be alive right now talking to you guys. Trust me."

"Trust you?" Misha said over his shoulder. "The way those Chinese did?"

"Oh, shit. What's the big deal? Look," Yevgeny said, "you gotta understand how it works. Used to be you could bring in as many Chinks as you could haul and nobody cared, it's a big country and the big shots were glad of the cheap labor and the cops were cool as long as they got their cut."

Misha swerved the old Toyota to miss a pothole. Yevgeny lost his balance and toppled against Yura, who cursed and shoved him away. "God *damn,*" Yevgeny cried. "Come on, you guys, can't you at least take this tape off?

"No," Logan said. "You were saying?"

"Huh? Oh, right. See, everything's tightened up now. You can still bring in a few now and then, like those suits you guys picked up. But if I started running Chinks in any kind of numbers," Yevgeny said, "enough to make a profit, man, the shit would come down on me like you wouldn't believe. A bunch of them get caught, they talk, it's my ass."

"So you take their money," Logan said, "and you load them into the truck and take them out into the woods and shoot them."

"For Chrissake," Yevgeny said. His voice had taken on an aggrieved, impatient note; his facial expression was that of a man trying to explain something so obvious that it shouldn't need explaining. "They're *Chinks!*"

"They're human beings," Misha said.

"The fuck they are. A Chink ain't a man. Anyway," Yevgeny said, looking at Logan, "like you never killed anybody? I heard what you did up in Yakutsk—"

His voice died away. "Sorry," he said almost in a whisper.

Logan looked out the windows. "Almost to the airport," he said. "Now you're not going to give us any trouble, are you, Yevgeny? You're going to go along with us without any noise or fuss, right? Yura, show him."

Yura reached out with one hand and turned Yevgeny's head to face him. With the other hand he held up his big belt knife, grinning.

"Okay, okay. Sure." Yevgeny's face was paler than ever. "No problem . . . hey, where are we going?"

"You'll see," Logan told him. "It's a surprise."

Going up the logging road, watching Yevgeny lurching along ahead of him, Logan considered that maybe they should have let him put on a jacket or something. He'd come to the door of his apartment, in answer to their knock, wearing only a grubby sweat suit that he'd evidently been sleeping in; and they'd let him put on his shoes, but by the time anyone thought about a coat they'd already taped his wrists and it was too difficult to get one onto him.

Now he was shivering in the cold breeze that blew across the ridge; and Logan didn't really care about that, but he was getting tired of listening to Yevgeny complaining about it. Well, it wouldn't be much longer.

Up ahead, Misha turned off the overgrown road and up the trail toward the crest of the ridge. "That way," Logan said to Yevgeny.

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"Shit," Yevgeny whined. "What's all this about? I'm telling you guys, if you found some stiffs or something out here, it's got nothing to do with me. I never operated anywhere near here. I never even *been* anywhere near here."

"Shut up," Logan said, prodding him with the muzzle of the Kalashnikov. "Just follow Misha and shut up."

It was a long slow climb up the ridge and then down the other side. Yevgeny was incredibly clumsy on the trail; he stumbled frequently and fell down several times. At least he had stopped talking, except for occasional curses.

When they finally reached the little clearing he leaned against a tree and groaned. "Jesus," he said. "You guys do this all the time? What are you, crazy?"

Logan looked at him and past him, studying the tree. It wasn't the one he'd had in mind, but it would do just fine. He turned and nodded to the others.

"So," Yevgeny said, "are you gonna tell me now—hey, what the fuuuu—"

His voice rose in a yelp as Logan and Yura moved up alongside him and grabbed him from either side, slamming him back hard against the trunk of the tree. Misha moved in quickly with the roll of duct tape.

"Hey. Hey, what, why—" Yevgeny was fairly gobbling with terror now. "Come on, now—"

"*Harasho,*" Misha said, stepping back. "Look at that. Neat, huh?"

Logan walked around the tree, examining the bonds. "Outstanding," he said. "Very professional job."

Misha held up the rest of the roll of tape. "Want me to tape his mouth again?"

Yevgeny was now making a dolorous wordless sound, a kind of drawn-out moan. Logan started to tell Misha to go ahead and gag him, but then he changed his mind and shook his head.

Yura had already disappeared up the narrow game trail on the far side of the clearing. Now he came back, carrying a small cloth bag from which he sprinkled a thick greenish-brown powder along the ground. When he reached the tree where Yevgeny hung in his tape bonds he pulled the mouth of the bag wide open and threw the rest of the contents over Yevgeny's face and body.

"Now you smell good," he told Yevgeny.

Yevgeny had begun to blubber, "Oh God, oh Jesus," first in English and then in Russian, again and again. Logan didn't think he was praying, but who knew?

"All right," Logan said, "let's go."

They made better time going back over the ridge, without Yevgeny to slow them down. They were halfway down the other side when they heard it: a deep, coughing, basso roar, coming from somewhere behind them.

They stopped and looked at each other. Yura said, "*Amba* sounds hungry."

They moved on down the trail, hurrying a little now. Just as they reached the logging road they heard the roar again, and then a high piercing scream that went on and on. ○

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IKIRYOH

Liz Williams

The author's poignant new story is set in the same universe as her novel, *Banner of Souls*, which was published by Bantam Spectra in 2004.

Every evening, the kappa would lead the child down the steps of the water-temple to the edges of the lake. The child seemed to like it there, although since she so rarely spoke, it was difficult to tell. But it was one of the few times that the child went with the kappa willingly, without the fits of silent shaking, or whimpering hysteria, and the kappa took this for a good sign.

On the final step, where the water lapped against the worn stone, the child would stand staring across the lake until the kappa gently drew her down to sit on what remained of the wall. Then they would both watch the slow ripple of the water, disturbed only by the wake left by carp, or one of the big turtles that lived in the depths and only occasionally surfaced. Legend said that they could speak. Sometimes the kappa thought that she detected the glitter of intelligence in a turtle's ebony eye, behind the sour-plum bloom, and she wondered where they had come from, whether they had always been here in the lake, indigenous beasts from early times, or whether they resulted from some later experimentation and had been introduced. If the kappa had been here alone, she might have tried to capture one of the turtles, but she had her hands full enough with the child, the *ikiryoh*.

Now, she looked at the child. The *ikiryoh* sat very still, face set and closed as though a shadow had fallen across it. She looked like any other human child, the kappa thought: fine brows over dark, slanted eyes, a straight fall of black hair. It was hard to assess her age: perhaps seven or eight, but her growth had probably been hothoused.

When the palace women had brought the child to the kappa, all these questions had been asked, but the kappa had received no satisfactory answers.

"Does she have a name?" the kappa had asked the women. One had merely stared, face flat and blank, suggesting concentration upon some inner programming rather than the scene before her. The other woman, the kappa thought, had a touch of the tiger: a yellow sunlit gaze, unnatural height, a faint stripe to the skin. A typical bodyguard. The kappa took care to keep her manner appropriately subservient.

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"She has no name." the tiger-woman said. "She is *ikiryoh*." The word was a growl.

"I am afraid I am very stupid," the kappa said humbly. "I do not know what that means."

"It does not matter," the tiger-woman said. "Look after her, as best you can. You will be paid. You used to be a guardian of children, did you not?"

"Yes, for the one who was—" the kappa hesitated.

"The goddess before I-Nami," the tiger-woman said. "It is all right. You may speak her name. She died in honor."

"I was the court nurse," the kappa said, eyes downward. She did not want the tiger-woman to glimpse the thought like a carp in a pool: *yes, if honor requires that someone should have you poisoned.* "I took care of the growing bags for the goddess Than Geng."

"And one of the goddess Than Geng's children was, of course, I-Nami. Now, the goddess remembers you, and is grateful."

She had me sent here, in the purge after Than Geng's death. I was lucky she did not have me killed. Why then is she asking me to guard her own child?—the kappa wondered, but did not say.

"And this child *is* the goddess I-Nami's?" she queried, just to make sure.

"She is *ikiryoh*," the tiger-woman said. Faced with such truculent conversational circularity, the kappa asked no more questions.

In the days that followed it was impossible not to see that the child was disturbed. Silent for much of the time, the *ikiryoh* was prone to fits, unlike anything the kappa had seen: back-arching episodes in which the child would shout fragmented streams of invective, curses relating to disease and disfigurement, the worst words of all. At other times, she would crouch shuddering in a corner of the temple, eyes wide with horror, staring at nothing. The kappa had learned that attempts at reassurance only made matters worse, resulting in bites and scratches that left little impression upon the kappa's thick skin, but a substantial impression upon her mind. Now, she left the child alone when the fits came and only watched from a dismayed distance, to make sure no lasting harm befell her.

The sun had sunk down behind the creeper trees, but the air was still warm, heavy and humid following the afternoon downpour. Mosquitoes hummed across the water and the kappa's long tongue flickered out to spear them before they could alight on the child's delicate skin. The kappa rose and her reflection shimmered in the green water, a squat toad-being. Obediently, the child rose, too, and reached out to clasp the kappa's webbed hand awkwardly in her own. Together, they climbed the steps to the water-temple.

Next morning, the child was inconsolable. Ignoring the bed of matting and soft woven blankets, she lay on the floor with her face turned to the wall, her mouth open in a soundless wail. The kappa watched, concerned. Experience had taught her not to interfere, but the child remained in this position for so long, quite rigid, that at last the kappa grew alarmed and switched on the antiscribe to speak to the palace.

It was not the tiger-woman who answered, but the other one, the modified person. The kappa told her what was happening.

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"You have no reason to concern yourself," the woman said, serene. "This is to be expected."

"But the child is in grave distress. If there's something that can be done—" The kappa wrung her thick fingers.

"There is nothing. It is normal. She is *ikiryoh*."

"But what should I do?"

"Ignore it." The woman glanced over her shoulder at a sudden commotion. The kappa heard explosions.

"Dear heaven. What's happening?"

The woman looked at her as though the kappa were mad. "Just firecrackers. It's the first day of the new moon."

Out at the water-temple, the kappa often did not bother to keep track of the time, and so she had forgotten that they had now passed into Rain Month and the festival to commemorate I-Nami's Ascension into goddesshood. Today would be the first day of the festival: it was due to last another three.

"I have matters to attend to," the woman said. "I suggest you do the same."

The screen of the antiscribe faded to black. The kappa went in search of the child and to her immense relief, found her sitting up against the wall, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Are you feeling better?" the kappa asked.

"I'm bored!"

Like any young child. Bored was good, the kappa decided.

"Let's make noodles," she said, and then, because the *ikiryoh's* face was still shadowed, "And then maybe we will go to the festival. How would you like that?"

The kappa was supposed to be confined to the water-temple, but there were no guards or fences, and she was aware of a sudden longing for a change of scene. There would be so many people in the city, and a child and a kappa were so commonplace as to be invisible. They could hitch a ride on a farm cart.

The child's face lit up. "I would like that! When can we go?"

"First, we will have something to eat," the kappa said.

They reached the city toward late afternoon, bouncing in on the back of a truck with great round wheels. The child's eyes grew wide when she saw it.

"That is a strange thing!" she said.

"Surely you have seen such vehicles before?" the kappa asked, puzzled. After all, the child had presumably grown up in the palace, and she had been brought to the water-temple in one of I-Nami's skimmers. A vegetable truck seemed ordinary enough.

The child's face crumpled. "I can't remember."

"Well, don't worry about it," the kappa said quickly, not wanting to disquiet her. She held tightly to the child's hand and peered over the tops of the boxes, filled with melons and radishes and peppers, with which they were surrounded. The road was a congested mass of hooting trucks, crammed with people, and the occasional private vehicle. The hot air was thick with a gritty dust and the kappa was thankful for the wide hat that

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she wore, which kept the worst of the heat from her sparsely-haired head. The child sneezed.

"Is it much further?"

"I hope not." But they were turning into Sui-Pla Street now, not too far from the center. The kappa could hear the snap of firecrackers and the rhythmic beat of ceremonial drums, churning out prayers in praise of the goddess.

Goddess, indeed, the kappa thought. *She is only a woman, grown in a bag like everyone else.* These deified elevations did little good in the end: at first, after each new coup, the folk all believed, not so much from credulity as weariness, the hope that now things might finally become better. But each time it was the same: the woman behind the mask would begin to show through, the feet turn to clay, and the masses would grow angry as yet another ruler succumbed to self-indulgence, or apathy, or cruelty. Than Geng had been one of the former sort, and had at least retained the status quo. The kappa knew little about I-Nami, what manner of ruler she had become. She knew better than to ask, because that might betray her as someone who doubted, and for some rulers, that was enough.

Certainly, the people were putting on a good show. Still clasping the *ikiryoh*'s hand, the kappa stepped down from the back of the truck and into the crowd.

"Hold tight," she told the child. "Don't let go. I don't want to lose you among all these people."

They watched as a long dragon pranced by, followed by lions made from red-and-gold sparkles. Slippered feet showed beneath. As the sky darkened into aquamarine, fireworks were let off, exploding like stars against the deep-water color of the heavens. The kappa and the child walked past stalls selling all manner of things: candy and circuit components and dried fruit and flowers. The kappa bought a small, sticky box of candy for the child, who ate it in pleasurable silence. It was good, the kappa thought, to see her behaving so normally, like an ordinary little girl. She pulled gently at the *ikiryoh*'s hand.

"Is everything all right?"

The child nodded, then frowned. "What's that?"

The firecracker explosions were doubling in intensity. There was a sudden cacophony of sound. A squadron of tiger-women raced around the corner, wearing ceremonial harness, heads adorned with tall golden hats. They carried pikes, with which they pretended to attack the crowd. The child let out a short, sharp shriek.

"Hush," the kappa said, her heart sinking. "See? It's only a game."

The child shrank back against her skirts, hand hovering near her mouth. "I don't like them. They are so big."

"It means the goddess is coming," a young woman standing next to the kappa said. She sounded superior: a city girl enlightening the ignorant peasants. "The procession has already begun up in the main square—from there, it will come down here and into Nang Ong."

"Do you hear that?" the kappa said, tightening her grip a little on the child's hand. "You're going to see the goddess." She bent to whisper into the child's ear. "Do you remember her?"

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"The goddess?" the child whispered. "What is that?"

The kappa frowned. The tiger-woman had specifically said that the child had come from I-Nami. Maybe the *ikiryoh* simply did not remember. But it raised further questions about her upbringing and age. "You will soon see," the kappa said, feeling inadequate.

Through the taller humans, the kappa could get a glimpse of the start of the procession: a lion-dog, prancing. At first she thought the *kylin* was composed of another set of costumed people, but then she realized that it was real. Its eyes rolled golden, the red tongue lolled. The child's grip on the kappa's hand became painful.

"Don't worry," the kappa said. "See—it is on its lead." The *kylin's* handlers strained behind it, laughing and shouting out to one another as it tossed its magnificent mane. Behind it came a litter, borne on the shoulders of four beings that were a little like kappa, but larger and more imposing. Heavy, glossy shells covered their backs. They lumbered along, smiling beneath their load. All of these beings—the turtle bearers, the *kylin*, the tiger-women—all were the genetic property of the palace itself. No one else could breed or own such folk, unlike the commonplace kappa, who had been bred so long ago for menial work in the factories and paddy fields of Malay. The kappa remembered people like this from her own days in the palace; remembered, too, what was said to have taken place behind closed doors for the amusement of the goddess Than Geng and her guests. The kappa had not mourned Than Geng in the slightest, but the rumors were that I-Nami was worse.

"Our goddess is coming," someone said softly behind her. There were murmurs of approval and excitement. *If only they knew*, thought the kappa. But it had always been the way of things. She looked up at the litter, which was drawing close. The curtains were drawn, and now I-Nami herself was leaning out, waving to the crowd. Her oval face had been painted in the traditional manner: bands of iridescent color gliding across her skin. Her great dark eyes glowed, outlined in gold. The very air around her seemed perfumed and sparkling. Surprised, the kappa took a step back. Illusion and holographics, nothing more, and yet she had never seen anyone who so resembled a goddess.

"She is so beautiful!" a woman said beside the kappa, clapping her hands in excitement.

"Yes, she is," the kappa said, frowning.

"And she has been so good to us."

"Really?" The kappa turned, seeking the knowing smile, the cynical turn of the mouth, but the woman seemed quite sincere.

"Of course! Now, it is safe to walk the streets at night. She came to my tenement building and walked up the stairs to see it for herself, then ordered the canal to be cleaned. Now we have fresh water and power again. And there is food distribution on every corner for the poor, from subsidized farms. Things are so much better now."

There were murmurs of agreement from the crowd. Startled, the kappa looked down at the child. "Did you hear that?"

But the child's face was a mask of fainting horror. Her eyes had disappeared, rolling back into her head until only a blue-white line was show-

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ing, and a thin line of spittle hung from her mouth. She sagged in the kappa's grip. Without hesitating, the kappa picked her up and shoved through the crowd to an empty bench. She laid the child along it. The *ikiryoh* seemed barely conscious, muttering and cursing beneath her breath.

"What's wrong?" the kappa cried, but the child did not reply. The kappa shuffled back to the crowd as fast as she could and tapped a woman on the shoulder. "I need a healer, a doctor—someone!"

The woman turned. "Why, what is wrong?"

"My ward is ill. Maybe the heat—I don't know."

"There is a clinic around the corner in Geng Street, but I should think they'll all be out watching the procession," the woman said.

The kappa thought so too, but she had little choice. What if the child was dying? She picked the *ikiryoh* up and carried her through a gap in the buildings to Geng Street, which was little more than a collection of shacks. I-Nami's benign influence had clearly not penetrated here—or perhaps it had, because the street pump was working and when the kappa touched the button, a stream of clear water gushed out. She wetted the corner of her skirt and dabbed at the child's face, then carried her on to the blue star that signified the clinic.

At first, she thought that the woman had been right and there was no one there. But as she stood peering through the door, she saw a figure in the back regions. She rapped on the glass. A stout woman in red-patterned cloth came forward. Her face soured as she set eyes on the kappa.

"We're closed!"

"Please!" the kappa cried. She gestured to the child in her arms. Muttering, the woman unlocked the door.

"You'd better bring her in. Put her there, on the couch. You're lucky I was here. I forgot my flower petals, to throw. What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know. She suffers from these fits—I don't know what they are."

"You're her nurse?"

"Yes."

"She's very pale," the woman said. "Poor little thing. The healer's out—we have three here, all of them are traditional practitioners. I'll try and call them." She pressed her earlobe between finger and thumb. The kappa saw the gleam of green. "Ma Shen Shi? It's me, I'm at the clinic. There's a little girl who fainted. Can you come?"

It seemed the answer was positive. "Sit down," the woman said. "He'll be here in a bit."

The kappa waited, watching the child. She was whimpering and moaning, fists tightly clenched.

"Has she ever been this bad before?" the woman asked.

"No. She has—episodes." The kappa glanced up as the door opened. A small, elderly man came in, wearing the healer's red, with a cigarette in his mouth.

"Go and throw flower petals," he said to the woman. "And you, kappa—do something useful with yourself. Make tea. I will examine her."

The woman melted into the warm darkness outside. Reluctantly, the kappa found a kettle behind the reception desk and switched it on, then

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put balls of tea into three cups, watching the healer as she did so. He examined the child's eyes and ears, stretched out her tongue, knocked sharply on her knees and elbows and checked her pulse. Then he simply sat, with eyes closed and one hand stretched out over the child's prone form. The kappa longed to ask what he was doing, but did not dare interrupt. The child began to pant, a terrible dog-like rasping. Then she howled, until it became a fading wail. The healer opened his eyes.

"What is wrong with her?" the kappa whispered. "Do you know?"

"I know exactly what is wrong with her," the healer said. He came over to the desk and sipped at the tea. "If you can put it like that. She is *ikiryoh*. A fine specimen of the art, too."

The kappa stared at him. "That's what they told me, when they brought her to me. But what is an *ikiryoh*?"

"An *ikiryoh* is something from legend, from the old stories they used to tell in the Nippon archipelago. It is a spirit."

"That little girl is no spirit. She's flesh and blood. She bleeds, she pees, she breathes."

"I am not saying that the legends are literally true," the healer said. "I have only ever seen one *ikiryoh* before, and that was male. In the old tales, they were formed from malice, from ill-will—the projected darkness of the unconscious."

"And now?"

"And now they are children grown to take on the worst aspects of someone—a clone, to carry the dark elements of the self. Emotions, concepts, feelings are extracted from the original and inserted into a blank host. That little girl is the worst of someone else. Do you have any idea who?"

The kappa hesitated. She knew very well who had done such a thing: I-Nami, the glowing, golden goddess, who had sent her small fractured self to live in the swamp. Then she thought of the woman in the crowd: of the clean canal, the tenement with lights and fresh water. It was enough to make her say, slowly, "No. I do not know."

"Well. It must be someone very wealthy—perhaps they had it done for a favored child. I've heard of such things. The kid gets into drugs or drink, or there's some genetic damage psychologically, so they have a clone grown to take on that part of the child and send it away. It costs a fortune. It would have been called black magic, once. Now it is black science."

"But what is happening to her now?"

"My guess is that she came close to the original, whose feelings she hosts, and that it's put her under strain. I don't understand quite how these things work—it's very advanced neuro-psychiatry, and as I say, it's rare."

"And the future?"

"I can't tell you that it's a happy one. She is all damage, you see. She has no real emotions of her own, little free will, probably not a great deal of intelligence. You are looking at a person who will grow up to be immensely troubled, who may even harbor appetites and desires that will prove destructive to others."

"And what would happen if the *ikiryoh* died?"

"I'm not sure," the healer said, "but in the legends, if anything happens

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to the *ikiryoh*, the stored emotions pass back to the person who once possessed them."

"Even if the person does not know that the *ikiryoh* is dead?"

"Even then."

He and the kappa stared at one another.

"I think," the kappa said at last, "That I had better take her home."

Next day, toward evening, the kappa once more sat on the steps of the water-temple. The child was sleeping within. It was very quiet, with only the hum of cicadas in the leaves and the ripple of fish or turtle. The kappa tried to grasp the future: the long years of fits and nightmares, the daily anguish. And once the *ikiryoh* reached puberty, what then? The kappa had seen too much of a goddess' dark desires, back at the temple: desires that seemed to embody a taste for the pain of others. How different had Than Geng been from I-Nami? And yet, I-Nami now was restoring the fortunes of her people: thousands of them . . .

The kappa looked up at a sudden sound. The child was making her way down the steps to the water. For a moment, the kappa thought: *it would be easy, if I must*. The child's frail limbs, powerless against the thick-muscled arms of the kappa; a few minutes to hold her under the water . . . It would be quick. And better do it now, while the *ikiryoh* was still a child, than face a struggle with an angry, vicious human adult. But what if the *ikiryoh* had a chance after all, could be remade, not through the aid of an arcane science, but simply through the love of the only family she had?

The kappa stared at the child and thought of murder, and of the goddess's glowing face, and then she sighed.

"Come," she said. "Sit by me," and together in stillness they watched the shadowy golden carp, half-seen beneath the surface of the lake. ○

INSIDE THE BUBBLE CHAMBER

It's enough for a painful deportation
when protons embrace, match force,
and, like lovers, lock in a death
spiral for its duration on skates.
They decay brilliantly—through divorce—
fashioning curves of cold
breath on light-sensitive glass plates
but for those who prefer less expedient
passions, this particle minute is hardly sufficient.

—Robert Frazier

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THE PERIMETER

Chris Beckett

Chris Beckett's short fiction has been regularly appearing in British and US anthologies since 1991, but his first full-length novel, *The Holy Machine* (Wildside Press), wasn't published until 2004. Slow though it may have been in coming, reviewers seem to like it. In this magazine, Paul Di Filippo described it as "a triumph." Chris is now completing a second novel, provisionally titled *Marcher*.

The first time Lemmy Leonard saw the white hart it was trotting past a sweet shop on Butcher Row at ten o'clock on a Wednesday morning. He'd never seen such a thing and would have followed it then if he hadn't seen PC Simon approaching. Lemmy was supposed to be in school and the authorities were having one of their crackdowns on truancy, so he had to slip down a side road until the policeman had passed by. When he emerged, the deer had gone.

It was strange how bereft that made him feel. All day the sense of loss stayed with him. He had no words for it, no way of explaining it at all.

"Are you okay, Lemmy darling?" said his mother that night as she brought him his tea. (She looked like a Hollywood starlet, but without the overweening vanity.) "Only you seem so quiet."

It was raining outside. You could tell by the faint grey streaks that crossed the room like interference on a TV screen.

The second time he saw it was outside a pub off the Westferry Road. It was two o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon and he was with Kit Rogers, Tina Miller, and James Moss. He *really* wanted to follow it then, but Kit had, just that minute, suggested they all go into Grey Town and if Lemmy had proposed something else it would have looked like he was afraid.

"Not Grey Town!" pleaded Tina. "I hate that creepy place."

"Are you saying you're scared?" asked Lemmy with a sneer.

"No I never but . . . Oh all right then, just so long as we don't meet that beggar. You know, the one who hasn't got any . . ."

"No, he's always on the same corner these days, over on the Blackwall side," said Kit with a sly look at James. "You won't see him if we go in on this side."

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Lemmy and his friends were Dotlanders. They were low-res enough to have visible pixels and they only had 128 colors apiece, except for James whose parents had middle-class aspirations and had recently upgraded to 256. Up in the West End they would all have looked like cartoon characters—even James—but down in Grey Town they looked like princes, the objects of envy and hate.

It was like descending to Hades, going in there and finding yourself surrounded by all those grainy faces. There were outline faces, even, faces with ticks for noses and single lines for mouths. Greyscale hustlers tried to sell them things, black-and-white dealers tried to do deals, dot-eyed muggers eyed them from doorways and wondered how much of a fight these Dotland kids would put up, and whether they had anything on them that would make it worth finding out. And then from the darkness under a railway arch came the sound that Tina dreaded and that Kit and James had tricked her into hearing

"Bleep!"

Tina screamed.

"You said he was over by Blackwall!"

The boys laughed.

"You bastards! You set me up on purpose!"

"Bleep!" went the darkness again and a plain text message appeared in green letters in the black mouth of the arch:

Help me! Please!

Guiltily each one of them tossed a few pence of credit in the direction of this unimaginably destitute being who could afford neither a body nor a voice.

"I really hate you for that, Kit!" Tina said. "You *know* how much that guy creeps me out!"

"Yes, but that's why it's so much fun winding you up!"

And then they saw the white hart again, trotting through the streets of Grey Town.

"There it is again," said Lemmy, "let's go and . . ."

But they were distracted by a commotion further up the street. A small crowd of young Greytowners were heading their way, laughing and jeering around a tall, solitary figure with an unruly mane of long white hair and an immensely upright bearing who was striding along in the midst of them, like an eagle or a great owl being mobbed by sparrows.

They recognized him as Mr. Howard. He was a big landlord in Grey Town and across the East End, and he came in occasionally to look over his properties, always wearing the same crumpled green velvet suit in true color and at as high a resolution as it was possible to be, with real worn elbows and real frayed cuffs and the true authentic greasy sheen of velvet that has gone for months without being cleaned.

What was fascinating and disturbing about Mr. Howard was his imperial disdain and the way he strode through Grey Town as if he owned the place. He actually *did* own quite a lot of it, but that was only one reason for his regal manner. The other reason was the absolute invulnerability that came from his being an Outsider. Sticks and stones would bounce off

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Mr. Howard, knives would turn. No one could hurt an Outsider, or even stop him in his tracks.

"Spook!" yelled a tiny little black-and-white boy from the curb with his little outline mouth. "Mr. Howard is a spook!"

"Peter! Over here! *Now!*" hissed the little black-and-white woman who was his mother.

The little boy looked round, smiling triumphantly, then saw her fear. He burst into tears and went running back to her. And the two little cartoon characters cowered together in the shadow of a doorway while Mr. Howard strode by.

Lemmy looked around for the white hart. But it had gone.

About a week later, Lemmy and the others were hanging around Dotlands Market, checking out the stalls selling low-res clothes and jewelry and shoes ("Never mind the resolution, look at the design!"), the equally low-res food stalls ("It might *look* low-res, darlin', but do you buy food to look at? The flavor is as high-res as it gets!"), and the pet stores with their little low-res cartoon animals ("These adorable little critters have genuine organic central nervous systems behind them, ladies and gents! Real feelings like you and me!").

"Look, Lemmy!" James said, pointing past the stalls, "There's that white animal again!"

Lemmy took over at once. "Okay. Listen. Be quiet and follow me!"

The deer was in a small dark alley between two old Victorian warehouses, grazing on tufts of grass that grew up through cracks in the tarmac. It lifted its head and looked straight in their direction. They all thought it was going to run, but it bent down again and calmly continued with its grazing.

"What *is* it?" Lemmy whispered as they drew up with it.

He reached out and touched it. The deer took no notice at all.

Kit shrugged.

"I'm bored. Let's go and do something else."

"Yeah let's," Tina said. "I don't like this animal. I'm sure it's something physical."

Lemmy and his friends didn't really understand "physical" but there was something threatening about it. Lemmy had come across a physical piece of paper in the street once, skipping and floating through the air as if it weighed nothing at all. And yet when it fell to the ground and he tried to pick it up, it was hard as iron to his touch and he couldn't shift it any more than he could shift a ten ton weight. And Outsiders were physical too in some way. They had some kind of affinity with physical objects. That was what defined them as being "outside."

"Physical?" Kit exclaimed, taking a step back. "Ugh! Do you really think so? I didn't know animals *could* be physical. Except birds, of course."

The deer lifted its head again and looked straight past them down the alley. How could a creature be so alert, yet be so completely indifferent to them even when they were so close? What else was there in the world for it to be scared of?

"Of course it's physical," James said. "Just look how high-res it is!"

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"Yeah, even more than you, Smoothie," said Kit.

And it was true. The deer wasn't at all like the cheerful little low-res dogs and cats that people in Dotlands kept as pets. You could see the individual hairs on its back.

But none of this concerned the white hart. It finished the tuft of grass it was eating and moved off slowly down the alley, as indifferent to their judgment as it was to their presence.

"Are you coming, Lemmy?" called Kit, as he followed James and Tina back to the cheerful market.

But Lemmy followed the white hart. He followed it right across London, through back streets, across parks, over railway tracks, in and out of low-res neighborhoods and high-res neighborhoods, across white areas and black areas, through shopping centers, across busy freeways.

It was slow progress. The deer kept doubling back on itself or going off in completely new directions for no apparent reason. Sometimes it stopped for twenty minutes to graze or to scratch with its hoof behind its ear. Sometimes it would run and skip along at great speed and Lemmy could barely keep up, though at other times he could walk right beside it, resting his hand on its back. Once it lay down in the middle of the road and went to sleep. Cars honked at it. One driver even got out and kicked it, which would have made Lemmy mad if it wasn't for the fact that the deer didn't even stir in its slumber and the man hurt his foot.

"Bloody Council," the driver said, glowering at Lemmy as he hobbled back to his car. "I thought they were supposed to keep these damned things out of here."

He—and all the cars behind him—had to drive up onto the curb to get around the sleeping animal.

What things? Lemmy wondered. What things were the Council supposed to keep out?

Five minutes later, the deer woke up and moved off of its own accord.

Another time it went through the front door of a small terraced house—not through an open door, but through the shiny blue surface of a closed one as if it was mist or smoke. It was a shocking and inexplicable sight, but such things happened occasionally in London. (Once, when Lemmy was little, he and his mother had been walking down a street when the whole section of road ahead of them had simply disappeared, as if someone had flipped over channels on TV and come to an unused frequency. A few seconds later it all returned again, just as it had been before.) Lemmy waited and after a few minutes the deer's antlers and head and neck appeared again through the door, looking like a hunting trophy. Then it came right through and trotted off down the street. (The blue door opened behind it and a bewildered couple came out and stood there and watched it go, with Lemmy following behind it.)

On they wandered, this way and that through the suburban streets. But as evening began to fall and the street lights came on, the deer seemed to move more purposefully northward. It was as if its day's work was done, Lemmy thought, and it was going home. It seldom stopped to graze now, it never doubled back. At a brisk trot, occasionally breaking

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into a run, it hurried on past miles of houses where families were settling down for the evening in the comfortable glow of television. A few times Lemmy thought he'd lost it when it ran ahead of him and disappeared from his view. But each time, just when he was on the point of giving up, he saw it again in the distance, a ghostly speck moving under the street lights, so he kept on going, though he was miles away from home now and in a part of the city he had never seen before.

And then the white deer came to the last house in London—and the city ended.

Lemmy realized London wasn't limitless, of course. He knew there were other places beyond—there were stations, after all, with gateways you could go through and visit New York or Florida or Benidorm or Heaven or Space—but it had never occurred to him that there might be a point where the city just petered out.

In front of him there was a row of orange lights that stretched away, up and down hills, in a long winding line to the east and west, along with a sign put up by the Council, one sign for every five lights:

Perimeter of Urban Consensual Field

To the north, beyond the lights and the signs, the glow of the orange lights continued for some yards but then stopped. After that there was nothing: no ground, no objects, no space, just a flickering blankness, like a spare channel on TV.

Lemmy hardly ever went to school and he could barely read—and in any case it was his practice to ignore official signs. What seemed important to him at that particular moment was that the white hart had already trotted forward under the orange lights and into the bare orange space beyond. Lemmy's Dotlands sense of honor dictated that he couldn't stop. Even if he had no idea what a *perimeter* was—let alone a *consensual field*—and even if it meant going into still stranger territory when he already had no idea where he was, he couldn't stop now any more than he could refuse a dare to go into the middle of Grey Town or to walk up to Mr. Howard and call him a spook to his terrifyingly high-res face.

And yet, almost immediately, he *did* stop, not because he'd changed his mind but because, when it came to it, he simply had no choice in the matter. He was just walking on the spot. It was impossible to go forward. And words he had seen on the signs appeared again, but this time flashing on and off in glowing green, right in front of his eyes:

Perimeter of Field!
Perimeter of Field!
Perimeter of Field!

There was nothing he could do but stand and watch the white deer trotting away to wherever it was that it was going.

Out in the orange glow it turned round and looked back in his direction. And now, oddly, for the first time it seemed distinctly alarmed. Had it finally noticed his existence, Lemmy wondered? And, if so, why now, when several times it had let him come up close enough to touch it and not seemed concerned at all? Why now, when it had been happy to lie in a road and be kicked?

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But whatever had frightened it this time, the deer fled in great skips and leaps.

And as it crossed from the orange glow of the lights into the flickering, empty-channel nothingness, it disappeared.

"I'm sorry. You were watching him, weren't you?" said a woman's voice. "I'm afraid it was me that scared him off."

Lemmy looked round. The speaker was tall, extremely ugly, and much older than anyone he had ever seen or spoken to—yet she was *very* high-res. You could see the little marks and creases on her skin. You could see the way her lipstick smeared over the edges of her lips and the coarse fibrous texture of her ugly green dress.

"Yeah, I was watching him. I've been following him. I wanted to know where he was going. I've been following him halfway across London."

"Well, I'm sorry."

Lemmy shrugged. "He would have gone anyway, I reckon. He was headed in that direction."

He looked out into the blankness in the distance.

"What I don't get though, is what is that out there and how come he just vanished?"

The woman took from her pocket a strange contraption consisting of two flat discs of glass mounted in a kind of frame, which hooked over her ears. She placed it in front of her eyes and peered through it.

"No, he hasn't vanished," she said. "He's still out there, look, just beyond the fence."

She clicked her tongue.

"But will you *look* at that big hole in the fence there! I suppose that must be how he got in."

"*I* can't see him," Lemmy said.

"Look just beyond the wire fence. In front of those trees."

"I can't *see* no fence. I can't see no trees neither."

"Oh silly me!" the old woman exclaimed. "I wasn't thinking. They're beyond the consensual field, aren't they? So of course you wouldn't be able to see them."

Lemmy looked at her. She was *so* ugly, yet she behaved like a famous actress, or a TV presenter. She had the grandness and the self-assurance and the ultra-posh accent.

"How come you can see it then? And how come that animal can go out there and I can't?"

"It's a deer," she said gently, "a male deer, a hart. The reason it can go out there and you can't is that it is a physical being and you are a consensual being. You can only see and hear and touch what is in the consensual field."

"Oh I know it's just physical," Lemmy said.

"*Just physical?* You say that so disparagingly, yet every human being on earth was physical once."

Lemmy pretended to laugh, thinking this must be some odd, posh actressy kind of joke.

"You don't know about that?" she asked him. "They don't teach you about that at school?"

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"I don't go to school," Lemmy said. "There's no point."

"No point in going to school! Dear me!" the woman exclaimed—and she half-sighed and half-laughed.

"Well, it's like this," she said. "In the city, two worlds overlap: the physical universe and the consensual field. Every physical thing that stands or moves within the city is replicated in the representation of the city that forms the backdrop of the consensual field. That's why you could see the hart in the city but not when it went beyond the perimeter. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Nope," said Lemmy shortly with an indifferent shrug.

"But how come it couldn't seem to see *me* though?" he couldn't help adding. "Not even in the city?"

"Well, how *could* a wild animal see the consensual field? Animals don't know that the consensual stuff is there at all. You and I might go into the city and see busy streets bustling with people, but, to the deer, the streets are empty. He can wander through them all day and meet no one at all except, once in a while, the occasional oddball like me."

Lemmy looked sharply at her.

"Like you? You're not a. . . ?"

The woman looked uncomfortable.

"Yes, I'm a physical human being. An Outsider as you call us. But please don't . . ."

She broke off, touching his arm in mute appeal. Lemmy saw for an instant how lonely she was—and, having a kind heart, he felt pity. But he simultaneously wondered if he could run quickly enough to get away before she grabbed him.

"Please don't go away!" the old woman pleaded. "We're just people, you know, just people who happen still to live and move in the physical world."

"So, you're like the animal then?"

"That's it. There are a few of us. There only can be a few of us who are lucky enough and rich enough and old enough to have been able to . . ."

"But how come you can see me then, if the animal couldn't?"

"I can see you because I have implants that allow me to see and hear and feel the consensual field."

Lemmy snorted.

"So you have to have special help to see the real world!"

"Well, some might say that the real world is that which is *outside* of the consensual field." She pointed out beyond the orange lights. "Like those trees, like those low hills in the distance. Like the great muddy estuary over there to the east, like the cold sea . . ."

She sighed.

"I *wish* I could show you the sea."

"I've been to the sea *loads* of times."

"You've been to manufactured seas, perhaps: theme park seas, sea-like playgrounds. I mean the *real* sea which no one thinks about any more. It just exists out there, slopping around in its gigantic bowl all on its own. Nowadays it might as well be on some uninhabited planet going round some far off star. So might the forests and the mountains and the . . ."

Lemmy laughed.

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"Things out there that no one can see? You're kidding me."

The old woman studied his face.

"I'll tell you what," she said. "You can't *see* the trees but if you listen, you will surely be able to hear them. Listen! It's a windy night. The sensors will pick it up."

Lemmy listened. At first he couldn't hear anything at all but gradually he became aware of a very faint sound which was new to him: a sighing sound, rising and falling, somewhere out there in the blankness. He could have listened for hours to this sound from a space that lay outside of his own universe.

He wasn't going to tell *her* that though.

"Nope," he said firmly. "I can't hear nothing."

The woman smiled and touched his cheek.

"I must say I like you," she said. "Won't you tell me your name and where you come from?"

He looked at her for a moment, weighing up her request.

"Lemmy," he then told her with a small firm nod. "Lemmy Leonard. I live down Dotlands way."

"Dotlands? My, that's a *long* way to have come! That *is* halfway across London! Listen, Lemmy, my name is Clarissa Fall. My house is just over there."

She pointed to a big Victorian mansion, perhaps half a mile away to the east, just inside the perimeter, illuminated from below by a cold greenish light.

"Why don't you come back and have something to eat with me before you go back home?"

He didn't fancy it at all but it seemed cruel to turn her down. She was *so* lonely. (I suppose they must *all* be lonely, he thought. No one wants to talk to them, do they? No one wants to meet their eyes. People in the street even tell their kids to come away from them.)

"Yeah all right," he said. "Just for a bit."

They came to Clarissa's house through a formal garden, with geometrical beds of rose bushes and stone fountains in the shape of nymphs and gods, standing in dark, glittering ponds. Pathways wound through it, from one strange tableau to the next, illuminated by electric lights set into the ground.

"The statues and the lights are physical," Clarissa said, "but we had to get rid of the physical roses and the physical water. It was all getting too difficult to maintain. So the roses and the fountains you can see are just consensual. They're part of the Field. If I switched off my implants, all that I would see here would be stone statues and ponds with nothing in them but dry mud and the skeletons of frogs."

She looked at Lemmy and sighed. The lights along the pathways had a cold greenish edge, like radiant ice.

"And of course you wouldn't be with me anymore," she added.

"What do you mean I wouldn't be here? Where else would I be?"

"Well . . . Well, I suppose that to yourself you *would* still be here. It's just that I wouldn't be able to *tell* that you were here, like the deer couldn't."

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He could see she wanted to say something else but that she thought she shouldn't. And then, in spite of herself, she said it anyway.

"Well really the deer's eyes didn't deceive it," she blurted out, "because really you *aren't* here, you are . . ."

"What do you mean I'm not bloody here?" demanded Lemmy hotly.

She looked at him with a curious expression, both guilty and triumphant. It was as if she was pleased to have got a reaction of *any* sort from him. Like some lonely kid in a school playground who no one likes, Lemmy thought, winding you up on purpose just to prove to herself that she exists.

They had come to Clarissa's front door. She turned to face him.

"Don't take any notice of what I said just now. *Of course* you're here, Lemmy. Of course you are. You're young, you're alive, you're full of curiosity and hope. You're more here than I am, if the truth be told, *far* more here than I am. "

She pushed open the door and they entered a cavernous marble hallway.

"Is that you, Clarissa?" came a querulous male voice.

An old man came out of a side room, his face yellowy and crumpled, his body twisted and stooped, his shapeless jeans and white shirt seemingly tied round the middle with string—and yet, like Clarissa, so high-res that he made Lemmy feel almost like a Greytowner.

"You've been out a long time," the old man grumbled. "Where on earth have you been?"

"Terence," she told him, "this is Lemmy."

The old man frowned into the space that she had indicated.

"Eh?"

"*This is Lemmy*," she repeated with that firm deliberate tone that people use when they are trying to remind others of things which they should really already know.

"*Implants,*" she hissed at him when he still didn't get the hint.

The old man fumbled, muttering, at something behind his ear.

"Oh God," he sighed wearily, seeing Lemmy for the first time and immediately looking away. "Not *again*, Clarissa. Not this all over again."

Clarissa told Lemmy to go into the lounge.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable, dear. I'll be with you in just a moment."

It was a high, long room lined with dark wooden paneling. On the walls hung big dark paintings of bowls of fruit, and dead pheasants and stern, unsmiling faces. A fire, almost burnt out, smoldered under an enormous mantelpiece with a design of intertwining forest leaves carved heavily into the dead black wood.

Lemmy sat himself awkwardly on a large dark-red sofa and waited, wishing he'd never agreed to come. Outside in the hallway, the two old people were having a row.

"Why shouldn't I switch off these damned implants in my own house? Why shouldn't I live in the real world without electronic enhancements? I don't ask you to bring these ghosts back with you!"

"Why can't you face the fact that their world *is* the real world now, Terence? They're not the ghosts, we are!"

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"Oh yes? So how come they would all vanish without trace if someone were to only unplug the blessed . . ."

"How come in twenty or thirty years time *we'll* all be dead and forgotten, and they'll still be here in their millions, living and loving, working and playing?"

"That's not the point and you know it. The point is that . . ."

"Oh for God's sake leave it, Terence. I'm not having this argument with you. I'm just not having this argument. I have a guest to attend to, as it so happens. In fact, *we* have a guest. We have a guest and I expect you to treat him as such."

She came into the room to join Lemmy, forcing a smile over a face that was still agitated and flushed from the fight in the hallway.

"Why don't you have a chocolate bun?" she cried, much too brightly, indicating a plate of small cakes.

Lemmy was ravenous and he reached out at once, but it was no good. He could touch the buns and feel them but he couldn't move them any more than he could move a truck or a house.

"Oh," Clarissa said, "I'm sorry, I quite forgot."

Again? thought Lemmy, remembering how she had "forgotten" earlier that he couldn't see beyond the perimeter.

"Never mind," she said, leaping up and opening a cupboard in the corner of the room. "I always keep some of your kind of food here. I don't often have visitors, but one never knows."

She came back to him with another plate of cakes. They were luridly colorful and so low-res that it was as if she had deliberately chosen them to contrast as much as possible with her own handmade food, but Lemmy was hungry and ate six of them, one after the other, while she sat and watched and smiled.

"My. You *were* hungry."

"I came all the way from Dotlands," Lemmy reminded her. "I ran quite a bit of it. And that animal didn't go in a straight line, neither. It was this way and that way and round and round."

She laughed and nodded. Then, as she had done before, she started to say something, stopped, and then said it anyway. It seemed to be a pattern of hers. But when you were alone a lot, perhaps you forgot the trick of holding things in?

"Do you know how that food of yours works?" she asked Lemmy. "Do you know how it fills you up?"

Lemmy didn't have time to reply.

"Every bite you take," she told him, "a computer sends out a signal and far away, a series of signals are sent to your olfactory centers and a small amount of nutrients are injected into the bloodstream of your . . ."

Lemmy frowned.

"Why do you keep doing that?"

"Doing what, dear?" She assumed an expression of complete innocence, but the pretence was as fragile as fine glass.

"Trying to make me feel bad."

"What do you mean, Lemmy dear? Why on earth do you think I'm trying to make you . . ."

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Then she broke off, ran her hands over her face as if to wipe away her falsely sincere expression and for a little while fell silent, looking into the almost burnt-out fire.

"It's jealousy I suppose," she said at length. "It's just plain jealousy. I envy you the bustle and banter of Dotlands. I envy you the life of the city. All my true friends are dead. There are only a few hundred of us Outsiders left in London and most of us can't stand the sight of each other after all this time. We can't have children you know, that was part of the deal when they let us stay outside. We had to be sterile. Of course we're all too old now anyway."

She gave the weary sigh of one for whom sorrow itself has grown tedious like a grey sky that will not lift.

"And out in the streets, well, you know yourself what it's like . . . You were unusual in that you didn't run as soon as you discovered what I was, or jeer at me, or get all your friends to come and laugh at me and call me a spook. That was good of you. And look how this stupid old woman shows her gratitude!"

Suddenly she picked up the plate of real physical chocolate buns, strode with them to the fire and emptied them into it. Pale flames—yellow and blue—rose up to devour the greased paper cups.

Then, for a time, they were both silent.

"Do you know that Mr. Howard?" asked Lemmy at length. "The one who owns all that property down in Grey Town."

"Richard Howard? *Know* him? I was married to him for five years!"

"Married? To Mr. Howard? You're *kidding*!"

"Not kidding at all," said Clarissa, smiling. "Mind you, most of us survivors have been married to one another at *some* point or another. There are only so many permutations for us to play with."

"So what's he like?"

"Richard Howard? Well, he never washes, is one thing about him," Clarissa said with a grimace. "He smells to high heaven."

"Smells?" said her husband. "Who smells? Who are you talking about?"

The old man had come into the room while they were talking and now he began rummaging noisily through a pile of papers on a dresser behind them, shuffling and snuffling, determined that his presence should not be overlooked.

"I still don't get where that white animal went," Lemmy said, "and why I couldn't follow it."

"White animal?" demanded the old man crossly, turning from his papers to address his wife. "What white animal was that?"

"It was a white hart," she told him, "an albino, I suppose."

"Oh yes, and how did he get to see it?"

"Well, it must have got in through one of those holes in the wildlife fence."

"Well, well," chuckled the old man. "One of those dratted holes again, eh? The Council *is* slipping up. All these great big holes appearing overnight in the fence!"

Puzzled, Lemmy looked at Clarissa and saw her positively cringing under her husband's scorn. But she refused to be silenced.

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"Yes," she went on, in an exaggeratedly casual tone, "and according to Lemmy here it wandered right down as far as Dotlands. He followed it back up here to try and find out where it came from. Then it went back over the perimeter and he couldn't follow it any further. But Lemmy doesn't . . ." she broke off to try and find a more tactful form of words, "he doesn't understand where it's got to."

"Well of course not," the old man grumbled. "They aren't honest with these people. They don't tell them what they really are or what's really going on. They . . ."

"Well, what *is* really going on?" Lemmy interrupted him.

"What's really going on?" Terence gave a little humorless bark of laughter. "Well, I could show him if he wants to see. I could fetch the camera and show him."

"Terence, I'm not sure that's such a good idea," began Clarissa weakly, but her objection was half-hearted and he was already back at the capacious dresser, rummaging in a drawer.

He produced a video camera and some cables which he plugged into the back of the TV in the corner. Part of the mantelpiece appeared on the screen, blurred and greatly magnified. Terence took out one of those glass disc contraptions that Clarissa had and placed it in front of his eyes. He made some adjustments. The view zoomed back and came into focus.

There was nothing remarkable about it. It was just the room they were sitting in. But when Terence moved the camera, something appeared on the screen that wasn't visible in the room itself—a silver sphere, somewhat larger than a football, suspended from the middle of the ceiling.

"What's that?" Lemmy asked.

"That's a sensor," the old man said, answering him, but looking at his wife. "Damn things. We have to have them in every single room in the house. Legal requirement. Part of the penalty for living inside the perimeter."

"But what is it? And why can't I see it except on the TV?"

"He doesn't know what a *sensor* is?" growled Terence. "Dear God! What do they *teach* these people?"

"It's not his fault, dear," said Clarissa gently.

"Yeah it is, actually," said Lemmy cheerfully. "I don't never go to school."

Amused in spite of himself, the old man snorted.

"It's like I was telling you earlier, dear," Clarissa said to Lemmy. "Sensors are the things that monitor the physical world and transmit the information to the consensual field . . ."

" . . . which superimposes whatever tawdry rubbish it wants over it," grumbled the old man, "like . . . like those ridiculous colored air-cakes."

He meant the low-res cakes that Clarissa had put out on a table for Lemmy. And now Lemmy discovered a disturbing discrepancy. Within the room he could see the plate on the table with three cakes on it still left over from the nine she had brought in for him. But on the TV screen, though the table and the plate were clearly visible, the plate was empty and there were no cakes at all.

"Why can't I see the cakes on the TV? Why can't I see the sensor in the room?"

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"The cakes are consensual. The sensor is physical," Terence said without looking at him. "A sensor detects everything but itself, just like the human brain. It feeds the Field with information about the physical world but it doesn't appear in the Field itself, not visually, not in tactile form. Nothing."

"Actually they're a nuisance for us, Lemmy," Clarissa chattered. "They're an eyesore and we bump our heads on them. But it's all right for you lot. You can walk right through them and see right through them. They don't get in your way at all."

She looked at her husband.

"Are you going to . . . I mean you're not going to point the camera at him are you? You're not going to show him *himself?*"

She was pretending to warn Terence not to do it, Lemmy noticed, but really she was making quite sure that he wouldn't forget.

"Yeah, go on then, show me," he said wearily, knowing already what he would see.

The old man swept the camera round the room. On the TV screen Lemmy saw Clarissa sitting in an armchair. He saw a painting of dead pheasants. He saw the dying embers of the fire and the corner of the dark-red sofa where he was sitting. And then, though he really didn't want to look, he saw the whole sofa.

Of course, just as he had guessed it would be, it was empty.

"All right then," Lemmy said in a tight voice. "So if I'm not really here, then where *am* I?"

"I can show you that too if you want," said Terence, still not looking at him, but addressing him directly for the first time. "Come upstairs and I'll show you . . ."

"Oh Terence," murmured Clarissa. "It's an awful lot for him to take in. I really think we should. . . ."

Yet she was already eagerly getting to her feet.

Lemmy followed them up the wide marble staircase to the first landing. Progress was slow. The old man was really struggling and had to pause several times to rest the camera and catch his breath.

"Let me carry it, Terence!" Clarissa said to him impatiently each time. "You know you don't like the stairs."

"I'm fine," he wheezed, his face flushed, his eyes moist and bloodshot. "Don't fuss so."

On the landing there were three glass cases, the first containing fossil shells, the second geological specimens, the third a hundred dead hummingbirds arranged on the branches of artificial trees. Some of the little iridescent birds had fallen from their perches and were dangling from strands of wire; a few lay at the bottom of the case. The old man hobbled on to the second set of stairs.

"Here's another sensor," he said, glancing, just for a moment, back at Lemmy.

He laid down the camera, stood on tiptoes and, gasping for breath, reached up to rap at something with his knuckles. It was a bit like the wind in the trees again. Lemmy could clearly *hear* the hollow sound of some hard surface being struck, but all he could *see* was Terence's liver-spotted hand

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rapping at thin air. And when Lemmy stepped forward himself and reached up into the same space, he could find nothing solid there at all.

"Terence disconnected this sensor once," said Clarissa. "Very naughty of him—we had to pay a big fine—but he unplugged it and . . ."

"I'll tell you what, I'll unplug it now," Terence said, reaching out. "I'll unplug it now and show this young fellow how his . . ."

And suddenly there was no staircase, no Clarissa, no Terence, just a flickering blankness and a fizzing rush of white noise. When Lemmy moved his foot there was nothing beneath it. When he reached out his hand there was no wall. When he tried to speak, no sound came. It was if the world had not yet been created.

Then a message flashed in front of him in green letters:

Local sensor error!

. . . and a soothing female voice spoke inside Lemmy's head.

"Apologies. There has been a local sensor malfunction. If not resolved in five seconds you will be relocated to your home address or to your nominated default location. One . . . Two . . . Three . . ."

But then he was back on the stairs again, in Clarissa's and Terence's decaying mansion.

"Reconnect it *now,* Terence!" Clarissa was shouting at her husband. "*Now!* Do you hear me?"

"Oh do shut up you silly woman. I already *have* reconnected it."

"Yeah," said Lemmy, "I'm back."

"I'm so sorry, Lemmy," Clarissa said, taking his arm. "Terence is so cruel. That must have been . . ."

The old man labored on up the stairs.

On the second landing, there was a case of flint arrowheads, another of Roman coins, and a third full of pale anatomical specimens preserved in formaldehyde: deformed embryos, a bisected snake, a rat with its belly laid open, a strange abysmal fish with teeth like needles. . . . Between the last two cases there was a small doorway with a gothic arch which led to a cramped spiral staircase. They climbed up it to a room which perched above the house in a faux-medieval turret.

The turret had windows on three sides. On the fourth side, next to the door, there was a desk with an antique computer on it. In the spaces between the windows there were packed bookshelves from floor to ceiling. Books and papers were stacked untidily on the desk and across the floor, most of them covered in thick dust.

"Terence's study," sniffed Clarissa. "He comes up here to do his world-famous research, though, oddly enough, no one in the world but him seems to know anything about it."

Terence ignored this. He placed his glass contraption on his nose and groped awkwardly behind the computer to find the port for the camera lead, snuffling and muttering all the while.

"Are you sure you want to see this, Lemmy?" asked Clarissa. "I mean this must all be a bit of a . . ."

"*There* we are," said the old man with satisfaction as the monitor came to life.

He carried the camera to the north-facing window, and propped it on

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the sill. Lemmy followed him and looked outside. He could see the garden down below with its ice-green lights and its fountains and roses. Beyond it was the procession of lights and signs (one sign for every five lights) that marked the edge of the city. Beyond that was the spare-channel void, flickering constantly with random, meaningless pinpricks of light.

"You won't be able to see anything through the window," said Terence, glancing straight at Lemmy for a single brief moment. "You're relying on sensors and they won't show you anything beyond the Field. But, of course, the room sensor will pick up whatever's on the monitor for you because that's here in the room."

Lemmy looked round at the monitor. The old man was fiddling with the camera angle and what Lemmy saw first, jiggling about on the screen, was the garden immediately below. It was different from what he had just seen out of the window. The lights were still there, but there were no roses. The ground was bare concrete and the ponds were bald, empty holes. Beyond the garden, the lights and warning signs around the perimeter looked just the same on the screen as they had looked out of the window, but beyond them there was no longer the flickering blankness. The tall chainlink wildlife fence was clearly visible and, beyond that, night and the dark shapes of trees.

The old man stopped moving the camera about and let it lie on the sill again so that it was pointing straight outwards. And now Lemmy saw on the screen a large concrete building, some way beyond the perimeter. Windowless and without the slightest trace of ornament, it was surrounded by a service road, cold white arc-lights and a high fence.

"*That* is where you are, my friend," said the old man, leaving the camera and coming over to peer at the screen through his glass discs. "That is the London Hub, the true location of all the denizens of the London Consensual Field. You're all in there, row after row of you, each one of you looking like nothing so much as a scoop of grey porridge in a goldfish bowl."

"Oh *honestly* Terence!" objected Clarissa.

"On each of five stories," Terence went on, "there are two parallel corridors half a mile long. Along each corridor there are eight tiers of shelving, and on each shelf, every fifty centimeters, there is another one of you. And there you sit in your goldfish bowls, all wired up together, dreaming that you have bodies and limbs and genitals and pretty faces . . . ."

"*Terence!*"

"Every once in a while," the old man stubbornly continued, "one of you shrivels up and is duly replaced by a new blob of porridge, cultured from cells in a vat somewhere, and dropped into place by a machine. And then two of you are deceived into thinking that you have conceived a child and given birth, when in fact . . ."

"Terence! Stop this *now*!"

The old man broke off with a derisive snort. Lemmy said nothing, his eyes fixed on the monitor.

"Of course you're wonderful for the environment," Terence resumed, after only the briefest of pauses. "That was the rationale, after all, that was the excuse. As I understand it, two hundred and fifty of you don't use as much energy or cause as much pollution as a single manipulative old par-

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asite like my dear Clarissa here—or a single old fossil like me. But that doesn't alter the fact that there isn't much more to any of you than there is to one of those pickled specimens I've got down on the landing there, or that your lives are an eternal video game in which you are fooled into thinking you really *are* the cartoon characters you watch and manipulate on the screen."

"Why do you *do* this, Terence?" Clarissa cried. "Why are you so cruel?"

The old man gave a bark of derision.

"*Cruel? Me?* You hypocrite, Clarissa. You utter hypocrite. It's you that keeps bringing them back here, these pretty boys, these non-existent video-game boys. Why would you do that to them if you didn't want to confront them with what they really are?"

He laughed.

"Yes, and why keep cutting those holes in the fence?"

Clarissa gasped. Her husband grinned at her.

"If you didn't want me to find out, my dearest, you should have put the wire cutters back in the shed where you found them. You cut the holes so that animals will wander down into the city and lure back more boys for you to bring home. That's right, isn't it? You're not going to try and deny it?"

Clarissa gave a thin, despairing wail.

"All right Terence, all right. But Lemmy is here now. Lemmy is *here*!"

"No he's not! He's not here at all. We've already established that. He's over there on a shelf in a jar of formaldehyde—or whatever it is that they pickle them in. He only *seems* to be here and we could very easily fix that by the simple act of turning off our implants. Why don't you turn yours off now if his presence distresses you? Even better, we could unplug the sensor and then even *he* won't think he's here. There'll be only you and me, up here all alone with our big empty house beneath us."

Clarissa turned to Lemmy.

"Don't pay any attention to him. You're as real as we are. You just live in a different medium from us, that's all, a more modern medium, a medium where you can be young and strong and healthy all your life, and never grow wrinkly and bitter and old like us. That's the truth of it, but Terence just can't accept it."

But Lemmy didn't answer her. He was watching the monitor. An enormous articulated truck had pulled up outside the London Hub and was now passing through a gate which had slid open automatically to let it in. Oddly, the cabin of the truck had no windows, so he couldn't tell who or what was driving it.

"Why don't you go over there and join them then, Clarissa my dear?" sneered Terence, his old eyes gleaming. "Why don't you get *your* brains spooned out into a jar and yourself plugged into the Field?"

Lemmy crept still closer to the screen.

"Hey look! He's out there! That white animal. Way over there by that big grey place."

"Lemmy, Lemmy," cried Clarissa, rushing over to him. "you're so . . ."

"Oh for goodness' sake, get a grip, woman!" snapped the old man.

He dragged a chair into the middle of the room.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

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"I'm going to do what you should have done from the beginning. Send this poor wretch home."

Wobbling dangerously, he climbed onto the chair and reached up towards an invisible object below the ceiling.

"... two ... three ... four ... five."

Lemmy was sitting in the corner chair in the cozy, cramped little living room that he shared with his parents, Dorothy and John. John was watching TV. Mouser, their blue cartoon cat, was curled up on the fluffy rug in front of the fire. (The man at Dotlands market had claimed he had an organic central nervous system. Who knows? Perhaps he did. Perhaps at the back of some shelf in the London Hub, he had a small-sized goldfish bowl and his own small-sized scoop of porridge.)

In with a flourish came Lemmy's mother wearing a new dress.

"Ta-da!"

She gave a little twirl and Lemmy's dad (who looked like a rock'n'roll star from the early days, except that he smiled far too easily) turned round in his armchair and gave an approving whistle.

"Oh hello Lemmy darling!" said Dorothy. "I didn't hear you come in!"

"Blimey!" exclaimed his father. "Me neither! You snuck in quietly, mate. I had no idea you was in the room!"

"So what do you think then, Lemmy?" Dorothy asked.

"Yeah, nice dress mum," Lemmy said.

"It's not just the dress, sweetheart. Your kind dad's given me a lovely early birthday present and got me upgraded to 256 colors. Can you see the difference? I think I look great!"

"Here comes the rain," said Lemmy's dad.

They could tell it was raining from the faint grey streaks that appeared in the room, like interference on TV. Not that they minded. The streaks were barely visible and they made it feel more cozy somehow, being inside in the warm with the TV and the fire going. It had never occurred to Lemmy or his parents to wonder what caused them.

But, right at that moment, Lemmy suddenly understood. The house had no physical roof. It had no physical ceilings, no physical upstairs floor, nothing to keep out the physical rain that fell from the physical sky. In the physical world there was no TV here, no fire, no lights, no fluffy rug, no comfy chairs, no Mouser or Dorothy or Lemmy or John, just an empty shell of brick, open to the sky, a ruin among many others, in the midst of an abandoned city.

"I *thought* your skin looked nice, mum," he said. "256 colors, eh? That explains it."

Dorothy laughed and ruffled his hair.

"Liar! You wouldn't have even noticed if I hadn't told you."

She sat down next to her husband on the settee and snuggled up against him to watch TV.

Lemmy moved his chair closer to the fire and tried to watch TV with them, tried to give himself over to it as he'd always done before, back in the days before Clarissa Fall let the white hart in from the forest beyond the perimeter. ○

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NEWTON'S MASS

How the pine tree came to be
integral to Newton's birthday
is unclear.

One would expect, from legend,
an apple tree; or an ash,
for Yggdrasill, that his theories
replaced.

Whatever the reason, fitting,
that families gravitate
on this day of remembrance
to its evergreen.

Fitting, the delicate orbs
we hang on it, evoking planets,
evoking the undone crystalline
spheres.

Fitting, the way the ornaments
divide and play with the light,
and also the day, coming so soon
after the increasing of it.

Fitting, the season
revolves about money,
for he was
Master of the Mint.

—Timons Esaias

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Damian Kilby and his wife Gretchen live in a leaky old house in Portland, Oregon. The author's first professional publication, "Travelers," was in our February 1990 issue. In recent years, he's put in stints as book reviewer, gallery art critic, press clipping bureau reader, and soundman on an independent film. After a long hiatus, Damian has returned to writing fiction. His short stories have appeared in *The Third Alternative, Universe,* and *Journal Wired.* In his new tale, he takes a look at the responsibilities and sacrifices that ensue when one becomes unstuck in . . .

EARTHTIME

Damian Kilby

Sprayed through the pores of space-time, Marie Lang was returned home. The air was still, humid in her lungs. She saw hazy rays of sunlight coming through the leaves and branches of a dogwood tree. Small high-pitched voices cheered and hooted. A slight turn of her head and she saw the children gathered round a picnic table, a little boy—with serious brown eyes—in the process of blowing out candles on a white frosted cake.

Marshmallow frosting, Marie remembered. Her son's seventh birthday party. Her son Eric.

This was the exact moment. Late one July afternoon, when she had been pulled away from her old life, from Earth and everyday reality, just as Eric was blowing out his candles. Twisting in and out of immeasurably distant loops and blisters in the space-time foam, as an agent for Aleph Prime, she'd long since stopped wishing for any possibility of coming back here.

Eric turned to look at her and Marie realized that she was holding a knife. She stepped forward to slice the cake.

The guests were gone and Eric sat on the living room floor, surrounded by his presents, slowly reading the sides of all the boxes they came in.

"I'll clean up the yard," Marie told Henry. She stared at his neck, noting a darker bump in the skin below his left ear. His hair was finer, more wispy than she thought it ought to be. There were particularly coarse red-

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dish patches of skin on his cheeks. Was this the wrong level of detail to focus on? She couldn't quite line up this man with her memories. Faded memories and very faded emotions. He glanced her way, she averted her eyes.

"Is everything okay?"

"I just need a little time to myself."

With sunset coming, the air outside seemed clearer, tasted fresher. She piled party debris on the picnic table and then lay down in the grass—which was in need of cutting and generously dotted with dandelions. She spread out her arms, stared up at the sky, and noted a hint of moisture in the soil beneath her. Here I am, in my own backyard, she told herself, as if to provide herself with some kind of orientation. Beyond the wooden fence would be more houses, sidewalks, streets, all the neighborhoods of the northeast section of the city. Portland, Oregon, United States of America. Planet Earth—in a reliable orbit around a modest sun, the whole solar system less than a speck, easily ignored from most points of view.

"Mama?" Eric stood nearby. "Well I, well can—well, remember when you said that on your birthday Granny let you stay up watching TV as late as you wanted, even if it was all night? Well, Papa said I should ask you."

"A birthday tradition," Marie muttered. She sat up and stared at him. "Of course. Yes. Stay up late."

She lay in bed, very aware of Henry's presence next to her, the heat of his body, the weight of him against the mattress, the little pulls on the covers as he adjusted his position in his sleep. She turned and stared at the clock on the bedside table, watching the second hand move and trying to catch the feeling that each moment was immutable, the passing here and now, not to be repeated, never to be altered, or reshaped. She tried to feel that these moments had form, depth, substance.

It didn't feel like she was going to get any sleep.

She wanted to continue thinking of herself as an agent personality for the Aleph Prime. From the timeless beginning of things, to the space and event crammed Omega point, Aleph was the universe's greatest potential, struggling toward full becoming.

Corkscrewing down between dimensions—as an individual or as a component of a complex matrix of personas—she had sensed the dark, unknowable, untouchable places. Sometimes she pictured the numerous layers of creation as a great game board: certain squares were fully occupied by The Opponent, existing now only in another version of the universe, cloaked within the dark of other possibility.

She had "stood" before manifestations of Aleph. Even while she understood that it had to channel itself through a myriad of cut and pasted borrowings of personas and ideas, she was dazzled, in awe beyond words, left with a desperate ache to have the glory she had glimpsed come fully into being. She gladly gave herself over to service, threading back and forth through the fabric of everything on one mission after another, helping to nudge the universe in the right directions.

* * *

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She slipped out of the house, dressed in T-shirt and sweats. The street's only occupants were the lines of stout old trees; there was comfort in her image of all the people, quiet and unaware in their beds. She could be a ghostly spy, slipping through silent spaces: a role she understood well. On the sidewalk she flexed her arms, shook her legs. She rested her fingers on her breast bone, then touched her stomach, her hips, knees, shins.

Searching within, she could find no regret about having been gone so long—so far away—from her family. Shouldn't she at least feel a little guilt about that?

She lifted her feet and began to jog down the street. The buzz of street lamps and the dopplered whoosh of the occasional car drew her out to the main drag of NE Broadway. She picked up the pace. Passed a hunched, rumbling street sweeper. A flat out run now. Feeling her muscles push and stretch, breath rasping through her throat, easily ignoring the instinct to slow up. She pounded headlong across the bridge and on into downtown, ignoring cruising police cars and the homeless curled up by the shadowed feet of office buildings.

Along the riverfront she tilted back her head to see the faint stars, the pale sky. Those stars seemed to reel away from her, and she finally noticed the slamming beat of her heart, the painful slap of her feet against the pavement. She gave in, at last, to her body's demand for a stop.

Bent over, panting, hands resting on knees, she took pleasure in the way her awareness slid down through her tingling body. She pushed down hard, into the numb throb of her feet, feeling sure she was on the verge of spreading out from there, into the pavement, to seep down through the wide spaces between atomic orbits, flow on out, to the river and beyond, make the pulse of this one body just a part of the tidal consciousness of the whole planet.

A dark curtain fell across her thoughts.

She found that she was down on hands and knees and that she had been holding her breath in her determination to escape. Exhale, inhale. Try to accept this body.

"Marie, your serve is totally on today. I'm so jealous."

Tennis on a Saturday morning—doubles with her girlfriends—Marie was finding that her body knew all the moves, even though her mind considered this game an unimportant shadow out of memory. But she did have new powers of concentration to bring to bear. The flow of her body and racket, hitting the ball dead on spot—it felt good. In a small way it was a meeting point between her new and old selves.

After two sets the foursome went for a leisurely lunch in a bustling neighborhood, crammed with restaurants and boutiques. They were old friends, Marie recalled, and they had a broad knowledge of each other's lives, which usually led them to extended, satisfying conversation. It was easy to be distracted by light and color and texture—pay attention to people. She reminded herself to nod and make encouraging noises at the right moments, to lean forward, to make eye contact at regular intervals, to maintain the act of being part of the conversation. Margaret was looking for a new job; Miriam was encouraging her step-daughter to see a

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therapist; Kate was moving into a new house. They discussed the traumas of buying and selling real estate, choosing neighborhoods, discovering the imperfections of a newly purchased home.

She watched her friends. Their eyes, the movements of their hands, the subtle turns of expression at the lips. One could only conjure up shallow little guesses of what was going on inside the heads of other people. She looked around the restaurant, and out the window at the shoppers and strollers passing by, all their faces telling her very little. Behind each of those faces were supposedly ordinary sets of human emotions and experiences. But how did you really know? Could there be others, hidden behind some of these ordinary façades, who had at some time been shunted away from this mundane world, spun off into cosmic adventure, then returned, left feeling lost and empty, but unable to describe or explain their experience to anyone?

"It's quite complicated, isn't it," he said. Martin was her therapist. He had a Ph.D., a thick auburn beard, a cozy office. She sat on the couch, trying to make herself comfortable, while he sat in an armchair, facing her at an angle, referring to his notes. "You were a kind of secret agent and an angel. And a warrior in a battle across all of time, fighting over a universe in a constant state of being made and unmade. Working for an entity, a thing—sort of like God—which exists and doesn't exist. It is utterly primal and way beyond intelligence and personality, but it needs both those things as tools in its struggle to birth itself?"

"Yes. Full of complexity," she agreed. She sighed. "I could only ever grasp a portion of it at any one time."

"And not just complexities. Freighted with contradictions. Self-negating oppositions." Martin had a beautiful speaking voice; it was slow, with a hint of gentle music, a hint of Southern drawl. He projected patience and good humored acceptance. "These magical experiences of yours have a certain mythic power, but—"

"There's no magic—it is physics."

"Ah, certainly—but, I want us to focus, at this point, on the fact that you are here seeing a psychotherapist. This is a choice you made on your own. It tells us that on some level you acknowledge these elaborate adventures as a construct. A delusion—if you can pardon the term—which you want to get past."

"It would make life easier, I guess, if none of it were true. . . ."

"I think we should try looking past the fate of the universe and put a spotlight on your daily life, here and now," Martin said.

She decided that it was time to have sex with her husband. She'd lain beside Henry night after night without physical contact, waiting for feelings to come, to inspire action. Now she moved across the bed and pressed against him, planting a kiss on his chin. This act might turn out to be the key to unlocking the door into feeling. So she kissed his lips, his cheeks, his earlobe. And he responded, returning kisses, pressing back against her, moving his hands and then his whole body.

For some time she thought she was actually there, within the act. Feel-

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ing how it was to be a human being making love—skin against skin, hips moving, muscles tensed, all a pleasurable flow. Yet she noted the function of knees and elbow joints as much as the sensation of fingertips and tongue. And each sensation might easily have been a universe away from the others. Her grip on the passing moments was further weakened by her attempts to connect everything to her all too abstract sense of self. At best she seemed to be a puppeteer, setting poses that indicated the existence of an inner coherence. Her true desire now was to snip the puppet's strings and free herself from the burden of worrying about having an inner life supposedly connected to all this activity.

When they were done, Henry rolled over and sighed. He pressed his lips together and stared up at the ceiling. She like the impression he gave that he'd let his mind go blank. So she stared up at the ceiling too, reaching out for the sensation of lazily drifting, away, without destination.

Eric wanted to make a collage. He piled stuff on the kitchen table: old copies of *Time*, *National Geographic*, *The New Yorker*, and *Premiere*, a week's worth of newspapers, and several large sheets of construction paper.

"But, but, but you have to help me," he told Marie when she came to look at what he was doing. He held up scissors and a stick of glue and waved them at her. "Aren't you going to make sure I don't make a mess?"

"Sure. Of course—I want to help you," Marie said. "So how do we start?"

"We . . . to start, we cut out lots of pictures. But you have to tell me to cover the table with some newspapers, so I don't get glue on the clean table."

"I was just going to tell you to do that. And be careful where you point those scissors."

Marie pulled her chair right over next to his and watched him pick through the magazines. He cut out faces—politicians, models from perfume ads, movie stars, completely ignoring their bodies. He stacked his collection of heads and then moved on to clipping images of cars and trucks and airplanes. Marie idly turned pages and snipped out the shape of a house here, a tree, some flowers there.

This little boy—her son—he had a certain smell to him that evoked deeply felt memory and emotion. The scent of a child was a sweeter thing than that of a grown man. She focused on the sweetness while watching his small fingers manipulate paper and scissors. In a certain kind of way she recalled the even sweeter smell of him as a babe in her arms. She pictured him as toddler, determinedly climbing up into her lap, pressing himself against her body. It was like opening a filing cabinet, reminding herself that there was a whole store of protective and loving memories to draw upon.

Soon Eric was on to the gluing stage of his project, linking human faces with pieces of machinery. When he shuffled through his collection of images, Marie had a flash of the kaleidoscopic shifting nature of Aleph Prime. Here was a sharp emotional experience. Oh to be in the Aleph's presence again! It stung her. Even to just have visions of *It* flicker before her eyes electrified her thoughts.

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She began cutting magazine pages into random pieces as fast as she could. Next she glued these shards of images and text into the form of a jagged pillar stretching up the middle of her own piece of construction paper. She tried to get her creation to imply as many angles and edges as possible. What she had done so far reached toward an idea of the Aleph—which just fueled her desire for more. She pasted new scraps on top of the previous work, feeling she could continuously reach toward a sense of Aleph Prime.

"I'm finished, Mama." Eric's voice came from somewhere near her elbow. She imagined that he was very far away—that her elbow was way down on another plane. If she didn't glance his way she could stay up on this level, pursuing glimpses of the infinite. "Don't you want to see mine, Mama?" Eric asked.

"In—in just a second. I've almost got something here . . . so. . . ."

There was an insistent tapping at her far away elbow. Her vision of the Aleph folded and flattened and became a pile of glossy paper scraps. She turned to her son and looked down into his gaze. She felt blank. Then slowly, she registered the expectant look down there in his eyes.

"There was a species. They were just spreading out into their galactic neighborhood with a new faster-than-light-speed ship drive. I appeared to them—revelation, recruitment—a voice from out of the bellies of their own starships. It was *I* who spoke—out of energies stretched between lower and higher geometries—the voice of Marie Lang, mother, wife, product of thirty-four years of human experience. But I drifted into abstraction: they couldn't understand me as well, or believe in me. They grew uneasy, fearful. I didn't understand it. Why couldn't they picture the pure beauty in my messages?" Marie paused and then told her therapist: "I think I understand, now. Understand why I've been sent back to my life on Earth."

"Oh?" Martin glanced up from his clipboard, expectant.

"With the accumulation of missions, I was losing my core self. Losing my identity. I have to learn to be human again."

"That's an interesting way to see it. Identity is a lifelong struggle, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course. But I should be able to connect with my own son. To be integrated, on some human level. So this is why I come to see you. Not to get rid of any kind of delusions. To help me find myself. Put my human self back together."

"We've been talking about your . . . situation for a good number of sessions now. I think you are ready to look at the root causes of your feelings of depression and alienation. And ready to take action." Martin leaned forward from the edge of his chair, closing the distance between them, locking his gaze onto her. "Look at the obvious. No more talking and obsessing your way around it: *you want to leave your husband*. A part of you, that is not allowed to speak out, knows you badly need to get out of this relationship. So much so that to surmount your guilt you produce this huge, strange construct. You must be suffocating, but you don't see yourself as the type who leaves or gives up. Thus you wrap yourself in

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tragic, self-sacrificing fantasies, full of loyalty to sterile, abstract causes. To be a healthy woman you have to make it your own choice to leave your husband."

"That's not it—when I get back in touch with my—"

"Stop." He held up his hand. "Don't waste any more time. You need to get out. Take responsibility for your desires. Let yourself think about other men. You may find yourself shedding your detachment. Look at other men. And, eventually, spend time with some of them."

Martin's open hand hovered in the space between them. Marie thought he seemed on the verge of resting the hand on her knee. In his eyes she thought she saw the flicker of his own needs replace the façade of detached understanding. Could she actually read the human needs behind his expression? Desire. The thrill of sexual conquest?

"It's going to be a painful process," Martin said, inching his hand back down to his own knee. "But you have to plunge forward, so that you don't fall back. Give yourself freedom."

She pushed herself back, deeper into the couch, and remained silent. She watched him, and thought that she had perceived something new and that she wouldn't be coming back here.

Marie awoke before her husband.

When the alarm rang she watched Henry fumble with it, press the snooze bar, and wrap his arms back around the pillow. She reminded herself to focus observation particularly on gesture, body language and expression and less on color, texture and light. The third time the alarm rang he flipped over onto his back, opening and closing his eyes many times, as if drifting back down into sleep and then willfully forcing himself up into wakefulness. He jumped up, apparently awake; but soon he sat back down on the edge of the bed, back slouched, head hung low. He held a pair of socks in one hand but sat still for three minutes before putting them on.

She peeked around the bathroom door and found him staring into the mirror, much of his face covered in shaving cream. He wiped some of it away from the corners of his mouth with one finger. She noted the way he pulled the razor up and then brought it down again over the same patch of cheek. His posture suggested deep concentration.

How do you see an ordinary man properly? You absorb all the ordinary details? Before she had left to work for the Aleph she had been very used to life with Henry. She remembered no unhappiness. She had inhabited this life thoroughly and had not thought about wanting another.

She stalked him down the stairs and into the kitchen. He poured two different kinds of cereal into one bowl. He sniffed the open milk carton twice and then poured milk in a circle over the contents of the bowl. She wondered if she'd once known all these details as thoroughly as she was now relearning them.

While spooning up his breakfast he paged through *U.S. News & World Report*, starting from the back of the magazine, reading a paragraph or two here and there. When he reached the front cover he started turning the pages again, going forward this time. He noticed her watching, for the

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first time, and gave her a small smile. Was there a brightness in his eyes? What did it mean?

Henry and Eric were in the backyard kicking around the soccer ball. They played at getting and keeping the ball away from each other, zigzagging from one end of the yard to the other.

Marie was inside, moving between three different windows so that she could view all the action. Each pane of glass contained its own subtle distortions. This was like having views into a series of closely sliced alternate universes. When she noticed that father and son were out of sight she hustled over to the next window.

Of course Henry could take the ball away from Eric anytime he wanted, the advantage of size and adult dexterity. Now it seemed that he couldn't resist showing off, keeping the ball to himself with a blur of fancy footwork, his son always a footstep behind, kicking at air.

Henry relented, behaving like a grown-up again, and let his son bash the ball away. He tried to show Eric how to tap the ball with the sides of his feet. Instead the boy knocked it away with his knee and then chased after it behind a bush.

Both were out of sight now. Marie gathered herself together, focused on the idea of this one world, one backyard, and stepped out the door onto the patio where she had a direct view of the whole yard.

Eric waved to her.

"Mama, look what I can do."

He picked up the ball, tossed it up in front of him and, with a lunge, butted it with his forehead. He made a little victory jump.

"I'll show you a new tree I can climb, too."

Henry boosted him to the first branch of one of the trees by the back fence and Eric scrambled up two more branches on his own. Then Henry climbed up into the tree too, again seeming like a bigger kid showing off.

She approached, smiled at them, and grabbed onto one of the lower branches. She swung herself up, moving from branch to branch without hesitation. Balance, weighting, leverage—she got everything just right without pause, without thought. In a few seconds she was securely perched about five feet above the two of them.

"Look who's suddenly a gymnast," Henry said.

The muscles in Marie's arms and shoulders were quivering from their sudden use. She let out a grunt of breath.

"Mama's a monkey!"

They all laughed. Then they sat silently, up in the tree, looking around at the view.

She found Henry pulling weeds in the yard. A short heat wave had broken the night before—there were even clouds gathering overhead—suddenly everyone had a little more energy. He gazed over at her.

"Eric's gone to Tommy's for the night," she said. "Since it has cooled down, I thought I'd bake us a lasagna. We could eat in the dining room and open a bottle of wine."

"Wine sounds great," he replied, "but with the kid gone, why don't we

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break the rules a little and eat in the living room, on the rug. We could play a little Scrabble?"

Though there was plenty of daylight, Henry set out candles around the room; he also put on a CD of gentle bossa nova tunes. His actions seemed to say that he knew she was working her way back from the distant emotional space she'd slipped away to.

She let him check his words in the dictionary, but she still pulled way ahead when she landed "juicy" on a triple word square. He struggled but couldn't catch up before they were out of letters. When the food and game were done they leaned back against the couch, sipped wine and held hands. She thought he seemed happy and content with these uncomplicated hours together. And she felt it too. She also saw, distinctly, the desire in his eyes. A human need, and, appropriate to the occasion, melded to companionship and other abiding emotions.

Finally, she let out a half laugh into her glass and said, "I feel almost human."

He stroked her shoulder and kissed the side of her neck, in a spot that gave her goose bumps.

She said: "I know we're ready to . . . we should go up to the bedroom. But I—first I just need one more of those little moments to myself."

"I'll just pick up here and in the kitchen." He stood up. "And I will see you in a little bit, right?"

In the backyard, by herself, Marie pulled a few weeds, adding them to a pile left by Henry. Clouds filled the sky and she felt a light drizzle against her forehead and bare arms.

She lay down in the grass and stared up at the trees fringing the back fence, just listening to her own breath, feeling rooted to this one spot.

Something shifted. She had the sense of an opening of the space around her. The leaves above her blurred and expanded outward, filling her field of vision. From within, and pressing out, came sparkling green tunnels, etched with spiraling grooves. She felt herself stretch out—up and down, and in unnamable, strange directions—toward those tunnels; seeing/touching, beyond their curving horizon lines, the rippling shape of possibility. The unearthly green pulled insistently—shouldn't she breathe a sigh of relief and let go?

No. She pulled back, snapping into place, into the time bound body. The weight of that body pressed against grass, solid, her own. Breathing, heart pounding, sky above, a heavier rain coming down now.

She found that she was very calm; she stood up, went inside and headed upstairs.

It was another scorching late August afternoon. She sat in the shade, in the park, with Kate and Naomi, both of whom had sons close to Eric's age. They watched their boys wetting each other down with squirt guns.

"I wouldn't mind being squirted," Kate said. "It feels like nothing could possibly cool me down."

"They're in that stage where they have to assert their independence," Naomi said. "They like the power of shooting each other."

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"Acting out aggression, getting ready to grow up and become like their fathers."

Often we discuss the same things over and over, Marie thought. In a moment they will be back to complaining about the heat. She realized that sometimes her friends bored her a little, but she would be lonely without their voices around her. Friendship was a part of this new version of herself.

Eric came up to them with a fist full of daisies and dandelions.

"Oh my. Flowers for his mother!"

"See," Marie said, "my son is the exceptional, sensitive, artistic one."

Eric glanced back to the other boys, then he shouted "Nah, nah, hah, hah!" He threw his flowers up in the air so that they rained down on his mother's head, and then ran away, leaping back into the bright sunlight, practically bouncing his way back to his friends.

"Watching them grow up is not going to be pretty," Kate said.

Marie was back-to-school shopping at Target, with Eric, when she felt the call of the Aleph Prime. Eric had picked out sneakers, a Rusty and Big Guy lunch box, and an assortment of color pencils. Now he was busy examining the pictures on various three-ring binders.

Every mote and particle of the surrounding store unfolded toward her: corners, angles, planes, turning and flowing and expanding. Threads of Aleph, embodied in braids of various probabilities, reached through her and wrapped around her. She couldn't pull away. It was not really a call or a request, it was the simple truth that she was flowing away.

She grabbed for Eric—felt his hand in hers. For whatever long while that she was going to be off, weaving amongst the layers of creation, she wanted to remember that she was also here, in the aisle of this store, holding onto her son's hand. O

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Locus **called Kristine Kathryn Rusch's most recent science fiction/mystery novel, *Buried Deep* (Roc, 2005), "a grand act of Sfnal imagination." The novel is part of a loosely connected Endeavor-award-winning series based on the author's Hugo-nominated "Retrieval Artist" novella. Kristine's next novel, "Paloma," will be published in the spring. Meanwhile, she continues her award-winning short-story career. Last year, her tales appeared in the *Year's Best Science Fiction,* the *World's Finest Mystery and Crime Stories* as well as in the premiere anthology, *A Moment on the Edge: 100 Years of Crime Stories by Women.* Before you start her newest story, prepare yourself for unrelenting action. Be sure to take a deep breath before . . .**

DIVING INTO THE WRECK

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

We approach the wreck in stealth mode: lights and communications array off, sensors on alert for any other working ship in the vicinity. I'm the only one in the cockpit of the *Nobody's Business*. I'm the only one with the exact coordinates.

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The rest of the team sits in the lounge, their gear in cargo. I personally searched each one of them before sticking them to their chairs. No one, but no one, knows where the wreck is except me. That was our agreement.

They hold to it or else.

We're six days from Longbow Station, but it took us ten to get here. Misdirection again, although I'd only planned on two days working my way through an asteroid belt around Beta Six. I ended up taking three, trying to get rid of a bottom-feeder that tracked us, hoping to learn where we're diving.

Hoping for loot.

I'm not hoping for loot. I doubt there's something space-valuable on a wreck as old as this one looks. But there's history value, and curiosity value, and just plain old we-done-it value. I picked my team with that in mind.

The team: six of us, all deep-space experienced. I've worked with two before—Turtle and Squishy, both skinny space-raised women who have a sense of history that most out here lack. We used to do a lot of women-only dives together, back in the beginning, back when we believed that sisterhood was important. We got over that pretty fast.

Karl comes with more recommendations than God; I wouldn't've let him aboard with those rankings except that we needed him—not just for the varied dives he's gone on, but also for his survival skills. He's saved at least two diving-gone-wrong trips that I know of.

The last two—Jypé and Junior—are a father-and-son team that seem more like halves of the same whole. I've never wreck dived with them, though I took them out twice before telling them about this trip. They move in synch, think in synch, and have more money than the rest of us combined.

Yep, they're recreationists, but recreationists with a handle: their hobby is history, their desires—at least according to all I could find on them—to recover knowledge of the human past, not to get rich off of it.

It's me that's out to make money, but I do it my way, and only enough to survive to the next deep space trip. I don't thrive out here, but I'm addicted to it.

The process gets its name from the dangers: in olden days, wreck diving was called space diving to differentiate it from the planet-side practice of diving into the oceans.

We don't face water here—we don't have its weight or its unusual properties, particularly at huge depths. We have other elements to concern us: No gravity, no oxygen, extreme cold.

And greed.

My biggest problem is that I'm land-born, something I don't confess to often. I spent the first forty years of my life trying to forget that my feet were once stuck to a planet's surface by real gravity. I even came to space late: fifteen years old, already land-locked. My first instructors told me I'd never unlearn the thinking real atmosphere ingrains into the body.

They were mostly right; land pollutes me, takes out an edge that the space-raised come to naturally. I gotta consciously choose to go into the deep and dark; the space-raised glide in like it's mother's milk. But if I compare myself to the land-locked, I'm a spacer of the first order, someone who understands vacuum like most understand air.

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Old timers, all space-raised, tell me my interest in the past comes from being land-locked. Spacers move on, forget what's behind them. The land-born always search for ties, thinking they'll understand better what's before them if they understand what's behind them.

I don't think it's that simple. I've met history-oriented spacers, just like I've met land-born who're always looking forward.

It's what you do with the knowledge you collect that matters and me, I'm always spinning mine into gold.

So, the wreck.

I came on it nearly a year before, traveling back from a bust I'd got suckered into with the promise of glory. I was manually guiding my single-ship, doing a little mapping to pick up some extra money. They say there aren't any undiscovered places anymore in this part of our galaxy, just forgotten ones, and I think that's true.

An eyeblink is all I'd've needed to miss the wreck. I caught the faint energy signal on a sensor I kept tuned to deep space around me. The sensor blipped once and was gone, that fast. But I had been around enough to know that something was there. The energy signal was too far out, too faint to be anything but lost.

As fast as I could, I dropped out of FTL, cutting my sublight speed to nothing in the drop. It still took me two jumps and a half day of searching before I found the blip again and matched its speed and direction.

I had been right. It was a ship. A black lump against the blackness of space.

My single-ship is modified—I don't have automatic anythings in it, which can make it dangerous (the reason single-ships are completely automatic is so that the sole inhabitant is protected), but which also makes it completely mine. I've modified engines and the computers and the communications equipment, so that nothing happens without my permission.

The ship isn't even linked to me, although it is set to monitor my heart rate, my respiration rate, and my eyes. Should my heart slow, my breathing even, or my eyes close for longer than a minute, the automatic controls take over the entire ship. Unconsciousness isn't as much of a danger as it would be if the ship were 100 percent manual, but consciousness isn't a danger either. No one can monitor my thoughts or my movements simply by tapping the ship's computer.

Which turned out to be a blessing because now there are no records of what I had found in the ship's functions. Only that I had stopped.

My internal computer attached to the eyelink told me what my brain had already figured out. The wreck had been abandoned long ago. The faint energy signal was no more than a still-running current inside the wreck.

My internal computer hypothesized that the wreck was Old Earth make, five thousand years old, maybe older. But I was convinced that estimation was wrong.

In no way could Earthers have made it this far from their own system in a ship like that. Even if the ship had managed to survive all this time floating like a derelict, even if there had been a reason for it to be here,

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the fact remained: no Earthers had been anywhere near this region five thousand years ago.

So I ignored the computerized hypothesis, and moved my single-ship as close as I could get it to the wreck without compromising safety measures.

Pitted and space-scored, the wreck had some kind of corrosion on the outside and occasional holes in the hull. The thing clearly was old. And it had been floating for a very long time. Nothing lived in it, and nothing seemed to function in it either besides that one faint energy signature, which was another sign of age.

Any other spacer would've scanned the thing, but other spacers didn't have my priorities. I was happy my equipment wasn't storing information. I needed to keep this wreck and its whereabouts my secret, at least until I could explore it.

I made careful private notes to myself as to location and speed of the wreck, then went home, thinking of nothing but what I had found the entire trip.

In the silence of my free-floating apartment, eighteen stories up on the scattered space-station wheel that orbited Hector One Prime, I compared my eyeball scan to my extensive back-up files.

And got a jolt: the ship was not only Old Earth based, its type had a name: It was a Dignity Vessel, designed as a stealth warship.

But no Dignity Vessel had made it out of the fifty light year radius of Earth—they weren't designed to travel huge distances, at least by current standards, and they weren't manufactured outside of Earth's solar system. Even drifting at the speed it was moving, it couldn't have made it to its location in five thousand years, or even fifty thousand.

A Dignity Vessel.

Impossible, right?

And yet . . .

There it was. Drifting. Filled with mystery.

Filled with time.

Waiting for someone like me to figure it out.

The team hates my secrecy, but they understand it. They know one person's space debris is another's treasure. And they know treasures vanish in deep space. The wrong word to the wrong person and my little discovery would disappear as if it hadn't existed at all.

Which was why I did the second and third scans myself, all on the way to other missions, all without a word to a soul. Granted, I was taking a chance that someone would notice my drops out of FTL and wonder what I was doing, but I doubted even I was being watched that closely.

When I put this team together, I told them only I had a mystery vessel, one that would tax their knowledge, their beliefs, and their wreck-recovery skills.

Not a soul knows it's a Dignity Vessel. I don't want to prejudice them, don't want to force them along one line of thinking.

Don't want to be wrong.

The whats, hows and whys I'll worry about later. The ship's here.

That's the only fact I need.

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* * *

After I was sure I had lost every chance of being tracked, I let the *Business* slide into a position out of normal scanner and visual range. I matched the speed of the wreck. If my ship's energy signals were caught on someone else's scans, they automatically wouldn't pick up the faint energy signal of the wreck. I had a half dozen cover stories ready, depending on who might spot us. I hoped no one did.

But taking this precaution meant we needed transport to and from the wreck. That was the only drawback of this kind of secrecy.

First mission out, I'm ferry captain—a role I hate, but one I have to play. We're using the skip instead of the *Business*. The skip is designed for short trips, no more than four bodies on board at one time.

This trip, there's only three of us—me, Turtle, and Karl. Usually we team-dive wrecks, but this deep and so early, I need two different kinds of players. Turtle can dive anything, and Karl can kill anything. I can fly anything.

We're set.

I'm flying the skip with the portals unshielded. It looks like we're inside a piece of black glass moving through open space. Turtle paces most of the way, walking back to front to back again, peering through the portals, hoping to be the first to see the wreck.

Karl monitors the instruments as if he's flying the thing instead of me. If I hadn't worked with him before, I'd be freaked. I'm not; I know he's watching for unusuals, whatever comes our way.

The wreck looms ahead of us—a megaship, from the days when size equaled power. Still, it seems small in the vastness, barely a blip on the front of my sensors.

Turtle bounces in. She's fighting the grav that I left on for me—that landlocked thing again—and she's so nervous, someone who doesn't know her would think she's on something. She's too thin, like most divers, but muscular. Strong. I like that. Almost as much as I like her brain.

"What the hell is it?" she asks. "Old Empire?"

"Older." Karl is bent at the waist, looking courtly as he studies the instruments. He prefers readouts to eyeballing things; he trusts equipment more than he trusts himself.

"There can't be anything older out here," Turtle says.

"Can't is relative," Karl says.

I let them tough it out. I'm not telling them what I know. The skip slows, shuts down, and bobs with its own momentum. I'm easing in, leaving no trail.

"It's gonna take more than six of us to dive that puppy," Turtle says. "Either that, or we'll spend the rest of our lives here."

"As old as that thing is," Karl says, "it's probably been plundered and replundered."

"We're not here for the loot." I speak softly, reminding them it's an historical mission.

Karl turns his angular face toward me. In the dim light of the instrument panel, his gray eyes look silver, his skin unnaturally pale. "You know what this is?"

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I don't answer. I'm not going to lie about something as important as this, so I can't make a denial. But I'm not going to confirm either. Confirming will only lead to more questions, which is something I don't want just yet. I need them to make their own minds up about this find.

"Huge, old." Turtle shakes her head. "Dangerous. You know what's inside?"

"Nothing, for all I know."

"Didn't check it out first?"

Some dive team leaders head into a wreck the moment they find one. Anyone working salvage knows it's not worth your time to come back to a place that's been plundered before.

"No." I pick a spot not far from the main doors, and set the skip to hold position with the monster wreck. With no trail, I hope no one's gonna notice the tiny energy emanation the skip gives off.

"Too dangerous?" Turtle asks. "That why you didn't go in?"

"I have no idea," I say.

"There's a reason you brought us here." She sounds annoyed. "You gonna share it?"

I shake my head. "Not yet. I just want to see what you find."

She glares, but the look has no teeth. She knows my methods and even approves of them sometimes. And she should know that I'm not good enough to dive alone.

She peels off her clothes—no modesty in this woman—and slides on her suit. The suit adheres to her like it's a part of her. She wraps five extra breathers around her hips—just-in-case emergency stuff, barely enough to get her out if her suit's internal oxygen system fails. Her suit is minimal—it has no back-up for environmental protection. If her primary and secondary units fail, she's a little block of ice in a matter of seconds.

She likes the risk; Karl doesn't. His suit is bulkier, not as form-fitting, but it has external environmental back-ups. He's had environmental failures and barely survived them. I've heard that lecture half a dozen times. So has Turtle, even though she always ignores it.

He doesn't go starkers under the suit either, leaving some clothes in case he has to peel quickly. Different divers, different situations. He only carries two extra breathers, both so small that they fit on his hips without expanding his width. He uses the extra loops for weapons, mostly lasers, although he's got a knife stashed somewhere in all that preparedness.

The knife has saved his life twice that I know of—once against a claim-jumper, and once as a pick that opened a hole big enough to squeeze his arm through.

They don't put on the headpieces until I give them the plan. One hour only: twenty minutes to get in, twenty minutes to explore, twenty minutes to return. Work the buddy system. We just want an idea of what's in there.

One hour gives them enough time on their breathers for some margin of error. One hour also prevents them from getting too involved in the dive and forgetting the time. They have to stay on schedule.

They get the drill. They've done it before, with me anyway. I have no idea how other team leaders run their ships. I have strict rules about everything, and expect my teams to follow.

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Headpieces on—Turtle's is as thin as her face, tight enough to make her look like some kind of cybernetic human. Karl goes for the full protection—seven layers, each with a different function; double night vision, extra cameras on all sides; computerized monitors layered throughout the external cover. He gives me the handheld, which records everything he "sees." It's not as good as the camera eyeview they'll bring back, but at least it'll let me know my team is still alive.

Not that I can do anything if they're in trouble. My job is to stay in the skip. Theirs is to come back to it in one piece.

They move through the airlock—Turtle bouncing around like she always does, Karl moving with caution—and then wait the required two minutes. The suits adjust, then Turtle presses the hatch, and Karl sends the lead to the other ship.

We don't tether, exactly, but we run a line from one point of entry to the other. It's cautionary. A lot of divers get wreck blindness—hit the wrong button, expose themselves to too much light, look directly into a laser, or the suit malfunctions in ways I don't even want to discuss—and they need the tactical hold to get back to safety.

I don't deal with wreck blindness either, but Squishy does. She knows eyes, and can replace a lens in less than fifteen minutes. She's saved more than one of my crew in the intervening years. And after overseeing the first repair—the one in which she got her nickname —, I don't watch.

Turtle heads out first, followed by Karl. They look fragile out there, small shapes against the blackness. They follow the guideline, one hand resting lightly on it as they propel themselves toward the wreck.

This is the easy part: should they let go or miss by a few meters, they use tiny air chips in the hands and feet of their suits to push them in the right direction. The suits have even more chips than that. Should the diver get too far away from the wreck, they can use little propellants installed throughout their suits.

I haven't lost a diver going or coming from a wreck.

It's inside that matters.

My hands are slick with sweat. I nearly drop the handheld. It's not providing much at the moment—just the echo of Karl's breathing, punctuated by an occasional "fuck" as he bumps something or moves slightly offline.

I don't look at the images he's sending back either. I know what they are—the gloved hand on the lead, the vastness beyond, the bits of the wreck in the distance.

Instead, I walk back to the cockpit, sink into my chair, and turn all monitors on full. I have cameras on both of them and readouts running on another monitor watching their heart and breathing patterns. I plug the handheld into one small screen, but don't watch it until Karl approaches the wreck.

The main door is scored and dented. Actual rivets still remain on one side. I haven't worked a ship old enough for rivets; I've only seen them in museums and histories. I stare at the bad image Karl's sending back, entranced. How have those tiny metal pieces remained after centuries? For

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the first time, I wish I'm out there myself. I want to run the thin edge of my glove against the metal surface.

Karl does just that, but he doesn't seem interested in the rivets. His fingers search for a door release, something that will open the thing easily.

After centuries, I doubt there is any easy here. Finally, Turtle pings him.

"Got something over here," she says.

She's on the far side of the wreck from me, working a section I hadn't examined that closely in my three trips out. Karl keeps his hands on the wreck itself, sidewalking toward her.

My breath catches. This is the part I hate: the beginning of the actual dive, the place where the trouble starts.

Most wrecks are filled with space, inside and out, but a few still maintain their original environments, and then it gets really dicey—extreme heat or a gaseous atmosphere that interacts badly with the suits.

Sometimes the hazards are even simpler: a jagged metal edge that punctures even the strongest suits; a tiny corridor that seems big enough until it narrows, trapping the diver inside.

Every wreck has its surprises, and surprise is the thing that leads to the most damage—a diver shoving backward to avoid a floating object, a diver slamming his head into a wall jarring the suit's delicate internal mechanisms, and a host of other problems, all of them documented by survivors, and none of them the same.

The handheld shows a rip in the exterior of the wreck, not like any other caused by debris. Turtle puts a fisted hand in the center, then activates her knuckle lights. From my vantage, the hole looks large enough for two humans to go through side-by-side.

"Send a probe before you even think of going in there," I say into her headset.

"Think it's deep enough?" Turtle asks, her voice tinny as it comes through the speakers.

"Let's try the door first," Karl says. "I don't want surprises if we can at all avoid them."

Good man. His small form appears like a spider attached to the ship's side. He returns to the exit hatch, still scanning it.

I look at the timer, running at the bottom of my main screen.

17:32

Not a lot of time to get in.

I know Karl's headpiece has a digital readout at the base. He's conscious of the time, too, and as cautious about that as he is about following procedure.

Turtle scuttles across the ship's side to reach him, slips a hand under a metal awning, and grunts.

"How come I didn't see that?" Karl asks.

"Looking in the wrong place," she says. "This is real old. I'll wager the metal's so brittle we could punch through the thing."

"We're not here to destroy it." There's disapproval in Karl's voice.

"I *know*."

19:01. I'll come on the line and demand they return if they go much over twenty minutes.

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Turtle grabs something that I can't see, braces her feet on the side of the ship, and tugs. I wince. If she loses her grip, she propels, spinning, far and fast into space.

"Crap," she says. "Stuck."

"I could've told you that. These things are designed to remain closed."

"We have to go in the hole."

"Not without a probe," Karl says.

"We're running out of time."

21:22

They are out of time.

I'm about to come on and remind them, when Karl says, "We have a choice. We either try to blast this door open or we probe that hole."

Turtle doesn't answer him. She tugs. Her frame looks small on my main screen, all bunched up as she uses her muscles to pry open something that may have been closed for centuries.

On the handheld screen, enlarged versions of her hands disappear under that awning, but the exquisite detail of her suit shows the ripple of her flesh as she struggles.

"Let go, Turtle," Karl says.

"I don't want to damage it," Turtle says. "God knows what's just inside there."

"Let go."

She does. The hands reappear, one still braced on the ship's side.

"We're probing," he says. "Then we're leaving."

"Who put you in charge?" she grumbles, but she follows him to that hidden side of the ship. I see only their limbs as they move along the exterior—the human limbs against the pits and the dents and the small holes punched by space debris. Shards of protruding metal near rounded gashes beside pristine swatches that still shine in the thin light from Turtle's headgear.

I want to be with them, clinging to the wreck, looking at each mark, trying to figure out when it came, how it happened, what it means.

But all I can do is watch.

The probe makes it through sixteen meters of stuff before it doesn't move any farther. Karl tries to tug it out, but the probe is stuck, just like my team would've been if they'd gone in without it.

They return, forty-two minutes into the mission, feeling defeated.

I'm elated. They've gotten farther than I ever expected.

We take the probe readouts back to the *Business,* over the protests of the team. They want to recharge and clean out the breathers and dive again, but I won't let them. That's another rule I have to remind them of—only one dive per twenty-four hour period. There are too many unknowns in our work; it's essential that we have time to rest.

All of us get too enthusiastic about our dives—we take chances we shouldn't. Sleep, relaxation, downtime all prevent the kind of haste that gets divers killed.

Once we're in the *Business*, I download the probe readouts, along with the readings from the suits, the gloves, and the handheld. Everyone gath-

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ers in the lounge. I have three-D holotech in there, which'll allow us all to get a sense of the wreck.

As I'm sorting through the material, thinking of how to present it (Handheld first? Overview? A short lecture?), the entire group arrives. Turtle's taken a shower. Her hair's wet, and she looks tired. She'd sworn to me she hadn't been stressed out there, but her eyes tell me otherwise. She's exhausted.

Squishy follows, looking somber. Jypé and Junior are already there, in the best seats. They've been watching me set up. Only Karl is late. When he arrives—also looking tired—Squishy stops him at the door.

"Turtle says it's old."

Turtle shoots Squishy an angry look.

"She won't say anything else." Squishy glances at me as if it's my fault. Only I didn't swear the first team to secrecy about the run. That was their choice.

"It's old," Karl says, and squeezes by her.

"She's says it's weird-old."

Karl looks at me now. His angular face seems even bonier. He seems to be asking me silently if he can talk.

I continue setting up.

Karl sighs, then says, "I've never seen anything like it."

No one else asks a question. They wait for me. I start with the images the skip's computer downloaded, then add the handheld material. I've finally decided to save the suit readouts for last. I might be the only one who cares about the metal composition, the exterior hull temperature, and the number of rivets lining the hatch.

The group watches in silence as the wreck appears, watches intently as the skip's images show a tiny Turtle and Karl slide across the guideline.

The group listens to the arguments, and Jypé nods when Karl makes his unilateral decision to use the probe. The nod reassures me. Jypé is as practical as I'd hoped he'd be.

I move to the probe footage next. I haven't previewed it. We've all seen probe footage before, so we ignore the grainy picture, the thin light, and the darkness beyond.

The probe doesn't examine so much as explore: its job is to go as far inside as possible, to see if that hole provides an easy entrance into the wreck.

It looks so easy for ten meters—nothing along the edges, just light and darkness and weird particles getting disturbed by our movements.

Then the hole narrows and we can see the walls as large shapes all around the probe. The hole narrows more, and the walls become visible in the light—a shinier metal, one less damaged by space debris. The particles thin out too.

Finally a wall looms ahead. The hole continues, so small that it seems like the probe can continue. The probe actually sends a laser pulse, and gets back a measurement: the hole is six centimeters in diameter, more than enough for the equipment to go through.

But when the probe reaches that narrow point, it slams into a barrier. The barrier isn't visible. The probe runs several more readouts, all of them denying that the barrier is there.

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Then there's a registered tug on the line: Karl trying to get the probe out. Several more tugs later, Karl and Turtle decide the probe's stuck. They take even more readouts, and then shut it down, planning to use it later.

The readouts tell us nothing except that the hole continues, six centimeters in diameter, for another two meters.

"What the hell do you think that is?" Junior asks. His voice hasn't finished its change yet, even though both Jypé and Junior swear he's over eighteen.

"Could be some kind of forcefield," Squishy says.

"In a vessel that old?" Turtle asks. "Not likely."

"How old is that?" Squishy's entire body is tense. It's clear now that she and Turtle have been fighting.

"How old is that, boss?" Turtle asks me.

They all look at me. They know I have an idea. They know age is one of the reasons they're here.

I shrug. "That's one of the things we're going to confirm."

"Confirm." Karl catches the word. "Confirm what? What do you know that we don't?"

"Let's run the readouts before I answer that," I say.

"No." Squishy crosses her arms. "Tell us."

Turtle gets up. She pushes two icons on the console beside me, and the suits' technical readouts come up. She flashes forward, through numbers and diagrams and chemical symbols to the conclusions.

"Over five thousand years old." Turtle doesn't look at Squishy. "That's what the boss isn't telling us. This wreck is human-made, and it's been here longer than humans have been in this section of space."

Karl stares at it.

Squishy shakes her head. "Not possible. Nothing human made would've survived to make it this far out. Too many gravity wells, too much debris."

"Five thousand years," Jypé says.

I let them talk. In their voices, in their argument, I hear the same argument that went through my head when I got my first readouts about the wreck.

It's Junior that stops the discussion. In his half-tenor, half-baritone way, he says, "C'mon, gang, think a little. That's why the boss brought us out here. To confirm her suspicions."

"Or not," I say.

Everyone looks at me as if they've just remembered I'm there.

"Wouldn't it be better if we knew your suspicions?" Squishy asks.

Karl is watching me, eyes slitted. It's as if he's seeing me for the first time.

"No, it wouldn't be better." I speak softly. I make sure to have eye contact with each of them before I continue. "I don't want you to use my scholarship—or lack thereof—as the basis for your assumptions."

"So should we discuss this with each other?" Squishy's using that snide tone with me now. I don't know what has her so upset, but I'm going to have to find out. If she doesn't calm, she's not going near the wreck.

"Sure," I say.

"All right." She leans back, staring at the readouts still floating before

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us. "If this thing is five thousand years old, human made, and somehow it came to this spot at this time, then it can't have a forcefield."

"Or fake readouts like the probe found," Jypé says.

"Hell," Turtle says. "It shouldn't be here at all. Space debris should've pulverized it. That's too much time. Too much distance."

"So what's it doing here?" Karl asked.

I shrug for the third and last time. "Let's see if we can find out."

They don't rest. They're as obsessed with the readouts as I've been. They study time and distance and drift, forgetting the weirdness inside the hole. I'm the one who focuses on that.

I don't learn much. We need more information—we revisit the probe twice while looking for another way into the ship—and even then, we don't get a lot of new information.

Either the barrier is new technology or it is very old technology, technology that has been lost. So much technology has been lost in the thousands of years since this ship was built.

It seems like humans constantly have to reinvent everything.

Six dives later and we still haven't found a way inside the ship. Six dives, and no new information. Six dives, and my biggest problem is Squishy.

She has become angrier and angrier as the dives continue. I've brought her along on the seventh dive to man the skip with me, so that we can talk.

Junior and Jypé are the divers. They're exploring what I consider to be the top of the ship, even though I'm only guessing. They're going over the surface centimeter by centimeter, exploring each part of it, looking for a weakness that we can exploit.

I monitor their equipment using the skip's computer, and I monitor them with my eyes, watching the tiny figures move along the narrow blackness of the skip itself.

Squishy stands beside me, at military attention, her hands folded behind her back.

She knows she's been brought for conversation only; she's punishing me by refusing to speak until I broach the subject first.

Finally, when J&J are past the dangerous links between two sections of the ship, I mimic Squishy's posture—hands behind my back, shoulders straight, legs slightly spread.

"What's making you so angry?" I ask.

She stares at the team on top of the wreck. Her face is a smooth reproach to my lack of attention; the monitor on board the skip should always pay attention to the divers.

I taught her that. I believe that. Yet here I am, reproaching another person while the divers work the wreck.

"Squishy?" I ask.

She isn't answering me. Just watching, with that implacable expression.

"You've had as many dives as everyone else," I say. "I've never questioned your work, yet your mood has been foul, and it seems to be directed at me. Do we have an issue I don't know about?"

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Finally she turns, and the move is as military as the stance was. Her eyes narrow.

"You could've told us this was a Dignity Vessel," she says.

My breath catches. She agrees with my research. I don't understand why that makes her angry.

"I could've," I say. "But I feel better that you came to your own conclusion."

"I've known it since the first dive," she says. "I wanted you to tell them. You didn't. They're still wasting time trying to figure out what they have here."

"What they have here is an anomaly," I say, "something that makes no sense and can't be here."

"Something dangerous." She crosses her arms. "Dignity Vessels were used in wartime."

"I know the legends." I glance at the wreck, then at the handheld readout. J&J are working something that might be a hatch.

"A lot of wartimes," she says, "over many centuries, from what historians have found out."

"But never out here," I say.

And she concedes. "Never out here."

"So what are you so concerned about?"

"By not telling us what it is, we can't prepare," she says. "What if there're weapons or explosives or something else—"

"Like that barrier?" I ask.

Her lips thin.

"We've worked unknown wrecks before, you and me, together."

She shrugs. "But they're of a type. We know the history, we know the vessels, we know the capabilities. We don't know this at all. No one really knows what these ancient ships were capable of. It's something that shouldn't be here."

"A mystery," I say.

"A dangerous one."

"Hey!" Junior's voice is tinny and small. "We got it open! We're going in."

Squishy and I turn toward the sound. I can't see either man on the wreck itself. The handheld's imagery is shaky.

I press the comm, hoping they can still hear me. "Probe first. Remember that barrier."

But they don't answer, and I know why not. I wouldn't either in their situation. They're pretending they don't hear. They want to be the first inside, the first to learn the secrets of the wreck.

The handheld moves inside the darkness. I see four tiny lights—Jypé's glove lights—and I see the same particles I saw before, on the first images from the earliest probe.

Then the handheld goes dark. We were going to have to adjust it to transmit through the metal of the wreck.

"I don't like this," Squishy says.

I've never liked any time I was out of sight and communication with the team.

We stare at the wreck as if it can give us answers. It's big and dark, a blob

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against our screen. Squishy actually goes to the portals and looks, as if she can see more through them than she can through the miracle of science.

But she doesn't. And the handheld doesn't wink on.

On my screen, the counter ticks away the minutes.

Our argument isn't forgotten, but it's on hold as the first members of our little unit vanish inside.

After thirty-five minutes—fifteen of them inside (Jypé has rigorously stuck to the schedule on each of his dives, something which has impressed me)—I start to get nervous.

I hate the last five minutes of waiting. I hate it even more when the waiting goes on too long, when someone doesn't follow the time-table I've devised.

Squishy, who's never been in the skip with me, is pacing. She doesn't say any more—not about danger, not about the way I'm running this little trip, not about the wreck itself.

I watch her as she moves, all grace and form, just like she's always been. She's never been on a real mystery run. She's done dangerous ones—maybe two hundred deep space dives into wrecks that a lot of divers, even the most greedy, would never touch.

But she's always known what she's diving into, and why it's where it is.

Not only are we uncertain as to whether or not this is an authentic Dignity Vessel (and really, how can it be?), we also don't know why it's here, how it came here, or what its cargo was. We have no idea what its mission was either—if, indeed, it had a mission at all.

37:49

Squishy's stopped pacing. She looks out the portals again, as if the view has changed. It hasn't.

"You're afraid, aren't you?" I ask. "That's the bottom line, isn't it? This is the first time in years that you've been afraid."

She stops, stares at me as if I'm a creature she's never seen before, and then frowns.

"Aren't you?" she asks.

I shake my head.

The handheld springs to life, images bouncy and grainy on the corner of my screen. My stomach unclenches. I've been breathing shallowly and not even realizing it.

Maybe I am afraid, just a little.

But not of the wreck. The wreck is a curiosity, a project, a conundrum no one else has faced before.

I'm afraid of deep space itself, of the vastness of it. It's inexplicable to me, filled with not just one mystery, but millions, and all of them waiting to be solved.

A crackle, then a voice—Jypé's.

"We got a lot of shit." He sounds gleeful. He sounds almost giddy with relief.

Squishy lets out the breath she's obviously been holding.

"We're coming in," Junior says.

It's 40:29.

* * *

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The wreck's a Dignity Vessel, all right. It's got a DV number etched inside the hatch, just like the materials say it should. We mark the number down to research later.

Instead, we're gathered in the lounge, watching the images J&J have brought back.

They have the best equipment. Their suits don't just have sensors and readouts, but they have chips that store a lot of imagery woven into the suits' surfaces. Most suits can't handle the extra weight, light as it is, or the protections to ensure that the chips don't get damaged by the environmental changes—the costs are too high, and if the prices stay in line, then either the suits' human protections are compromised, or the imagery is.

Two suits, two vids, so much information.

The computer cobbles it together into two different information streams—one from Jypé's suit's perspective, the other from Junior's. The computer cleans and enhances the images, clarifies edges if it can read them and leaves them fuzzy if it can't.

Not much is fuzzy here. Most of it is firm, black-and-white only because of the purity of the glovelights and the darkness that surrounds them.

Here's what we see:

From Junior's point of view, Jypé going into the hatch. The edge is up, rounded, like it's been opened a thousand times a day instead of once in thousands of years. Then the image switches to Jypé's legcams and at that moment, I stop keeping track of which images belong to which diver.

The hatch itself is round, and so is the tunnel it leads down. Metal rungs are built into the wall. I've seen these before: they're an ancient form of ladder, ineffective and dangerous. Jypé clings to one rung, then turns and pushes off gently, drifting slowly deep into a darkness that seems profound.

Numbers are etched on the walls, all of them following the letters DV, done in ancient script. The numbers are repeated over and over again—the same ones—and it's Karl who figures out why: each piece of the vessel has the numbers etched into it, in case the vessel was destroyed. Its parts could always be identified then.

Other scratches marked the metal, but we can't read them in the darkness. Some of them aren't that visible, even in the glovelights. It takes Jypé a while to remember he has lights on the soles of his feet as well—a sign, to me, of his inexperience.

Ten meters down, another hatch. It opens easily, and ten meters beneath it is another.

That one reveals a nest of corridors leading in a dozen different directions. A beep resounds in the silence and we all glance at our watches before we realize it's on the recording.

The reminder that half the dive time is up.

Junior argues that a few more meters won't hurt. Maybe see if there are items off those corridors, something they can remove, take back to the *Business* and examine.

But Jypé keeps to the schedule. He merely shakes his head, and his son listens.

Together they ascend, floating easily along the tunnel as they entered

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it, leaving the interior hatches open, and only closing the exterior one, as we'd all learned in dive training.

The imagery ends, and the screen fills with numbers, facts, figures and readouts which I momentarily ignore. The people in the room are more important. We can sift through the numbers later.

There's energy here—a palpable excitement—dampened only by Squishy's fear. She stands with her arms wrapped around herself, as far from Turtle as she can get.

"A Dignity Vessel," Karl says, his cheeks flushed. "Who'd've thought?"

"You knew," Turtle says to me.

I shrug. "I hoped."

"It's impossible," Jypé says, "and yet I was inside it."

"That's the neat part," Junior says. "It's impossible and it's here."

Squishy is the only one who doesn't speak. She stares at the readouts as if she can see more in them than I ever will.

"We have so much work to do," says Karl. "I think we should go back home, research as much as we can, and then come back to the wreck."

"And let others dive her?" Turtle says. "People are going to ghost us, track our research, look at what we're doing. They'll find the wreck and claim it as their own."

"You can't claim this deep," Junior says, then looks at me. "Can you?"

"Sure you can," I say. "But a claim's an announcement that the wreck's here. Something like this, we'll get jumpers for sure."

"Karl's right." Squishy's voice is the only one not tinged with excitement. "We should go back."

"What's wrong with you?" Turtle says. "You used to love wreck diving."

"Have you read about early period stealth technology?" Squishy asks. "Do you have any idea what damage it can do?"

Everyone is looking at her now. She still has her back to us, her arms wrapped around herself so tightly her shirt pulls. The screen's readout lights her face, but all we can see are parts of it, illuminating her hair like an inverse nimbus.

"Why would you have studied stealth tech?" Karl asks.

"She was military," Turtle says. "Long, long ago, before she realized she hates rules. Where'd you think she learned field medicine?"

"Still," Karl says, "I was military too—"

Which explained a lot.

"—and no one ever taught me about stealth tech. It's the stuff of legends and kids' tales."

"It was banned." Squishy's voice is soft, but has power. "It was banned five hundred years ago, and every few generations, we try to revive it or modify it or improve it. Doesn't work."

"What doesn't work?" Junior asks.

The tension is rising. I can't let it get too far out of control, but I want to hear what Squishy has to say.

"The tech shadows the ships, makes them impossible to see, even with the naked eye," Squishy says.

"Bullshit," Turtle says. "Stealth just masks instruments, makes it impossible to read the ships on equipment. That's all."

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Squishy turns, lets her arms drop. "You know all about this now? Did you spend three years studying stealth? Did you spend two years of post-doc trying to recreate it?"

Turtle is staring at her like she's never seen her before. "Of course not."

"You have?" Karl asks.

Squishy nods. "Why do you think I find things? Why do you think I *like* finding things that are lost?"

Junior shakes his head. I'm not following the connection either.

"Why?" Jypé asks. Apparently he's not following it as well.

"Because," Squishy says, "I've accidentally lost so many things."

"Things?" Karl's voice is low. His face seems pale in the lounge's dim lighting.

"Ships, people, materiel. You name it, I lost it trying to make it invisible to sensors. Trying to recreate the tech you just found on that ship."

My breath catches. "How do you know it's there?"

"We've been looking at it from the beginning," Squishy says. "That damn probe is stuck like half my experiments got stuck, between one dimension and another. There's only one way in and no way out. And the last thing you want—the very last thing—is for one of us to get stuck like that."

"I don't believe it." Turtle says with such force that I know she and Squishy have been having this argument from the moment we first saw the wreck.

"Believe it." Squishy says that to me, not Turtle. "Believe it with all that you are. Get us out of here, and if you're truly humane, blow that wreck up, so no one else can find it."

"Blow it up?" Junior whispers.

The action is so opposite anything I know that I feel a surge of anger. We don't blow up the past. We may search it, loot it, and try to understand it, but we don't destroy it.

"Get rid it." Squishy's eyes are filled with tears. She's looking at me, speaking only to me. "Boss, please. It's the only sane thing to do."

Sane or not, I'm torn.

If Squishy's right, then I have a dual dilemma: the technology is lost, new research on it banned, even though the military keeps conducting research anyway—trying, if I'm understanding Squishy right, to rediscover something we knew thousands of years before.

Which makes this wreck so very valuable that I could more than retire with the money we'd get for selling it. I would—we would—be rich for the rest of our very long lives.

Is the tech dangerous because the experiments to rediscover it are dangerous? Or is it dangerous because there's something inherent about it that makes it unfeasible now and forever?

Karl is right: to do this properly, we have to go back and research Dignity Vessels, stealth tech, and the last few thousand years.

But Turtle's also right: we'll take a huge chance of losing the wreck if we do that. We'll be like countless other divers who sit around bars throughout this sector and bemoan the treasures they lost because they didn't guard them well enough.

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We can't leave. We can't even let Squishy leave. We have to stay until we make a decision.

Until I make a decision.

On my own.

First, I look up Squishy's records. Not her dive histories, not her arrest records, not her disease manifolds—the stuff any dive captain would examine—but her personal history, who she is, what she's done, who she's become.

I haven't done that on any of my crew before. I've always thought it an invasion of privacy. All we need to know, I'd say to other dive captains, is whether they can handle the equipment, whether they'll steal from their team members, and if their health is good enough to handle the rigors.

And I believed it until now, until I found myself digging through layers of personal history that are threaded into the databases filling the *Business*'s onboard computer.

Fortunately for me and my nervous stomach, the more sensitive databases are linked only to me—no one else even knows they exist (although anyone with brains would guess that they do)—and even if someone finds the databases, no one can access them without my codes, my retinal scan, and, in many cases, a sample of my DNA.

Still, I'm skittish as I work this—sound off, screen on dim. I'm in the cockpit, which is my domain, and I have the doors to the main cabin locked. I feel like everyone on the *Business* knows I'm betraying Squishy. And I feel like they all hate me for it.

Squishy's real name is Rosealma Quintinia. She was born forty years ago in a multinational cargo vessel called *The Bounty*. Her parents insisted she spend half her day in artificial gravity so she wouldn't develop spacer's limbs—truncated, fragile—and she didn't. But she gained a grace that enabled her to go from zero-G to Earth Normal and back again without much transition at all, a skill few ever gain.

Her family wanted her to cargo, maybe even pirate, but she rebelled. She had a scientific mind, and without asking anyone's permission, took the boards—scoring a perfect 100, something no cargo monkey had ever done before.

A hundred schools all over the known systems wanted her. They offered her room, board, and tuition, but only one offered her all expenses paid both coming and going from the school, covering the only cost that really mattered to a spacer's kid—the cost of travel.

She went, of course, and vanished into the system, only to emerge twelve years later—too thin, too poor, and too bitter to ever be considered a success. She signed on with a cargo vessel as a medic, and soon became one of its best and most fearless divers.

She met Turtle in a bar, and they became lovers. Turtle showed her that private divers make more money, and brought her to me.

And that was when our partnership began.

I sigh, rub my eyes with my thumb and forefinger, and lean my head against the screen.

Much as I regret it, it's time for questions now.

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Of course, she's waiting for me.

She's brought down the privacy wall in the room she initially shared with Turtle, making their rift permanent. Her bed is covered with folded clothes. Her personal trunk is open at the foot. She's already packed her nightclothes and underwear inside.

"You're leaving?" I ask.

"I can't stay. I don't believe in the mission. You've preached forever the importance of unity, and I believe you, Boss. I'm going to jeopardize everything."

"You're acting like I've already made a decision about the future of this mission."

"Haven't you?" She sits on the edge of the bed, hands folded primly in her lap, her back straight. Her bearing *is* military—something I've always seen, but never really noticed until now.

"Tell me about stealth tech," I say.

She raises her chin slightly. "It's classified."

"That's fucking obvious."

She glances at me, clearly startled. "You tried to research it?"

I nod. I tried to research it when I was researching Dignity Vessels. I tried again from the *Business*. I couldn't find much, but I didn't have to tell her that.

That was fucking obvious too.

"You've broken rules before," I say. "You can break them again."

She looks away, staring at that opaque privacy wall—so representative of what she'd become. The solid backbone of my crew suddenly doesn't support any of us anymore. She's opaque and difficult, setting up a divider between herself and the rest of us.

"I swore an oath."

"Well, let me help you break it," I snap. "If I try to enter that barrier, what'll happen to me?"

"Don't." She whispers the word. "Just leave, Boss."

"Convince me."

"If I tell you, you gotta swear you'll say nothing about this."

"I swear." I'm not sure I believe me. My voice is shaky, my tone something that sounds strange to even me.

But the oath—however weak it is—is what Squishy wants.

Squishy takes a deep breath, but she doesn't change her posture. In fact, she speaks directly to the wall, not turning toward me at all.

"I became a medic after my time in Stealth," she says. "I decided I had to save lives after taking so many of them. It was the only way to balance the score. . . ."

Experts believe stealth tech was deliberately lost. Too dangerous, too risky. The original stealth scientists all died under mysterious circumstances, all much too young and without recording any part of their most important discoveries.

Through the ages, their names were even lost, only to be rediscovered by a major researcher, visiting Old Earth in the latter part of the past century.

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Squishy tells me all this in a flat voice. She sounds like she's reciting a lecture from very long ago. Still, I listen, word for word, not asking any questions, afraid to break her train of thought.

Afraid she'll never return to any of it.

Earth-owned Dignity Vessels had all been stripped centuries before, used as cargo ships, used as junk. An attempt to reassemble one about five hundred years ago failed because the Dignity Vessels' main components and guidance systems were never, ever found, either in junk or in blueprint form.

A few documents, smuggled to the colonies on Earth's Moon, suggested that stealth tech was based on interdimensional science—that the ships didn't vanish off radar because of a "cloak" but because they traveled, briefly, into another world—a parallel universe that's similar to our own.

I recognized the theory—it's the one on which time travel is based, even though we've never discovered time travel, at least not in any useful way, and researchers all over the universe discourage experimentation in it. They prefer the other theory of time travel, the one that says time is not linear, that we only perceive it as linear, and to actually time travel would be to alter the human brain.

But what Squishy is telling me is that it's possible to time travel, it's possible to open small windows in other dimensions, and bend them to our will.

Only, she says, those windows don't bend as nicely as we like, and for every successful trip, there are two that don't function as well.

I ask for explanation, but she shakes her head.

"You can get stuck," she says, "like that probe. Forever and ever."

"You think this is what the Dignity Vessels did?"

She shakes her head. "I think their stealth tech is based on some form of this multi-dimensional travel, but not in any way we've been able to reproduce."

"And this ship we have here? Why are you so afraid of it?" I ask.

"Because you're right." She finally looks at me. There are shadows under her eyes. Her face is skeletal, the lower lip trembling. "The ship shouldn't be here. No Dignity Vessel ever left the sector of space around Earth. They weren't designed to travel vast distances, let alone halfway across our known universe."

I nod. She's not telling me anything I don't already know. "So?"

"So," she says. "Dozens and dozens of those ships never returned to port."

"Shot down, destroyed. They were battleships, after all."

"Shot down, destroyed, or lost," she says. "I vote for lost. Or used for something, some mission now lost in time."

I shrug. "So?"

"So you wondered why no one's seen this before, why no one's found it, why the ship itself has drifted so very far from home."

I nod.

"Maybe it didn't drift."

"You think it was purposely sent here?"

She shakes her head. "What if it stealthed on a mission to the outer regions of Old Earth's area of space?"

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My stomach clenches.

"What if," she says, "the crew tried to destealth—and ended up here?"

"Five thousand years ago?"

She shakes her head. "A few generations ago. Maybe more, maybe less. But not very long. And you were just the lucky one who found it."

I spend the entire night listening to her theories.

I hear about the experiments, the forty-five deaths, the losses she suffered in a program that started the research from scratch.

After she left R&D and went into medicine, she used her high security clearance to explore older files. She found pockets of research dating back nearly five centuries, the pertinent stuff gutted, all but the assumptions gone.

Stealth tech. Lost, just like I assumed. And no one'd been able to recreate it.

I listen and evaluate, and realize, somewhere in the dead of night, that I'm not a scientist.

But I am a pragmatist, and I know, from my own research, that Dignity Vessels, with their stealth tech, existed for more than two hundred years. Certainly not something that would have happened had the stealth technology been as flawed as Squishy said.

So many variables, so much for me to weigh.

And beneath it all, a greed pulses, one that—until tonight—I thought I didn't have.

For the last five centuries, our military has researched stealth tech and failed.

Failed.

I might have all the answers only a short distance away, in a wreck no one else has noticed, a wreck that is—for the moment anyway—completely my own.

I leave Squishy to sleep. I tell her to clear her bed, that she has to remain with the group, no matter what I decide.

She nods as if she's expecting that, and maybe she is. She grabs her nightclothes as I let myself out of the room, and into the much cooler, more dimly lit corridor.

As I walk to my own quarters, Jypé finds me.

"She tell you anything worthwhile?" His eyes are a little too bright. Is greed eating at him like it's eating at me? I'm almost afraid to ask.

"No," I say. "She didn't. The work she did doesn't seem all that relevant to me."

I'm lying. I really do want to sleep on this. I make better decisions when I'm rested.

"There isn't much history on the Dignity Vessels—at least that's specific," he says. "And your database has nothing on this one, no serial number listing, nothing. I wish you'd let us link up with an outside system."

"You want someone else to know where we are and what we're doing?" I ask.

He grins. "It'd be easier."

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"And dumber."

He nods. I take a step forward and he catches my arm.

"I did check one other thing," he says.

I am tired. I want sleep more than I can say. "What?"

"I learned long ago that if you can't find something in history, you look in legends. There's truths there. You just have to dig more for them."

I wait. The sparkle in his eyes grows.

"There's an old spacer's story that has gotten repeated through various cultures for centuries as governments have come and gone. A spacer's story about a fleet of Dignity Vessels."

"What?" I asked. "Of course there was a fleet of them. Hundreds, if the old records are right."

He waves me off. "More than that. Some say the fleet's a thousand strong, some say it's a hundred strong. Some don't give a number. But all the legends talk about the vessels being on a mission to save the worlds beyond the stars, and how the ships moved from port to port, with parts cobbled together so that they could move beyond their design structures."

I'm awake again, just like he knew I would be. "There are a lot of these stories?"

"And they follow a trajectory—one that would work if you were, say, leading a fleet of ships out of your area of space."

"We're far away from the Old Earth area of space. We're so far away, humans from that period couldn't even imagine getting to where we are now."

"So we say. But think how many years this would take, how much work it would take."

"Dignity Vessels didn't have FTL," I say.

"Maybe not at first." He's fairly bouncing from his discovery. I'm feeling a little more hopeful as well. "But in that cobbling, what if someone gave them FTL?"

"Gave them," I muse. No one in the worlds I know gives anyone anything.

"Or sold it to them. Can you imagine? One legend calls them a fleet of ships for hire, out to save worlds they've never seen."

"Sounds like a complete myth."

"Yeah," he says, "it's only a legend. But I think sometimes these legends become a little more concrete."

"Why?"

"We have an actual Dignity Vessel out there, that got here somehow."

"Did you see evidence of cobbling?" I ask.

"How would I know?" he asks. "Have you checked the readouts? Do they give different dates for different parts of the ship?"

I hadn't looked at the dating. I had no idea if it was different. But I don't say that.

"Download the exact specs for a Dignity Vessel," I say. "The materials, where everything should be, all of that."

"Didn't you do that before you came here?" he asks.

"Yes, but not in the detail of the ship's composition. Most people rebuild ships exactly as they were before they got damaged, so the shape would remain the same. Only the components would differ. I meant to check our

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readouts against what I'd brought, but I haven't yet. I've been diverted by the stealth tech thing, and now I'm going to get a little sleep. So you do it."

He grins. "Aye, aye, Captain."

"Boss," I mutter as I stagger down the corridor to my bed. "I can't tell you how much I prefer boss."

I sleep, but not long. My brain's too busy. I'm sure those specs are different, which confirms nothing. It just means that someone repaired the vessel at one point or another. But what if the materials are the kind that weren't available in the area of space around Earth when Dignity Vessels were built? That disproves Squishy's worry about the tech of that thing.

I'm at my hardwired terminal when Squishy comes to my door. I've gone through five or six layers of security to get to some very old data, data that isn't accessible from any other part of my ship's networked computer system.

Squishy waits. I'm hoping she'll leave, but of course she doesn't. After a few minutes, she coughs.

I sigh audibly. "We talked last night."

"I have one more thing to ask."

She stepped inside, unbidden, and closed the door. My quarters felt claustrophobic with another person inside them. I'd always been alone here—always—even when I had a liaison with one of the crew. I'd go to his quarters, never bring him into my own.

The habits of privacy are long engrained, and the habits of secrecy even longer. It's how I've protected my turf for so many years, and how I've managed to first-dive so many wrecks.

I dim the screen and turn to her. "Ask."

Her eyes are haunted. She looks like she's gotten even less sleep than I have.

"I'm going to try one last time," she says. "Please blow the wreck up. Make it go away. Don't let anyone else inside. Forget it was here."

I fold my hands on my lap. Yesterday I hadn't had an answer for that request. Today I do. I'd thought about it off and on all night, just like I'd thought about the differing stories I'd heard from her and from Jypé, and how, I realized fifteen minutes before my alarm, neither of them had to be true.

"Please," she says.

"I'm not a scientist," I say, which should warn her right off, but of course it doesn't. Her gaze doesn't change. Nothing about her posture changes. "I've been thinking about this. If this stealth tech is as powerful as you claim, then we might be making things even worse. What if the explosion triggers the tech? What if we blow a hole between dimensions? Or maybe destroy something else, something we can't see?"

Her cheeks flush slightly.

"Or maybe the explosion'll double-back on us. I recall something about Dignity Vessels being unfightable, that anything that hit them rebounded to the other ship. What if that's part of the stealth tech?"

"It was a feature of the shields," she says with a bit of sarcasm. "They were unknown in that era."

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"Still," I say. "You understand stealth tech more than I do, but you don't really *understand* it or you'd be able to replicate it, right?"

"I think there's a flaw in that argument—"

"But you don't really grasp it, right? So you don't know if blowing up the wreck will create a situation here, something worse than anything we've seen."

"I'm willing to risk it." Her voice is flat. So are her eyes. It's as if she's a person I don't know, a person I've never met before. And something in those eyes, something cold and terrified, tells me that if I met her this morning, I wouldn't want to know her.

"I like risks," I say. "I just don't like that one. It seems to me that the odds are against us."

"You and me, maybe," she says. "But there's a lot more to 'us' than just this little band of people. You let that wreck remain and you bring something dangerous back into our lives, our culture."

"I could leave it for someone else," I say. "But I really don't want to."

"You think I'm making this up. You think I'm worrying over nothing." She sounds bitter.

"No," I say. "But you already told me that the military is trying to recreate this thing, over and over again. You tell me that people die doing it. My research tells me these ships worked for hundreds of years, and I think maybe your methodology was flawed. Maybe getting the real stealth tech into the hands of people who can do something with it will *save* lives."

She stares at me, and I recognize the expression. It must have been the one I'd had when I looked at her just a few moments ago.

I'd always known that greed and morals and beliefs destroyed friendships. I also knew they influenced more dives than I cared to think about.

But I'd always tried to keep them out of my ship and out of my dives. That's why I pick my crews so carefully; why I call the ship *Nobody's Business*.

Somehow, I never expected Squishy to start the conflict.

Somehow, I never expected the conflict to be with me.

"No matter what I say, you're going to dive that wreck, aren't you?" she asks.

I nod.

Her sigh is as audible as mine was, and just as staged. She wants me to understand that her disapproval is deep, that she will hold me accountable if all the terrible things she imagines somehow come to pass.

We stare at each other in silence. It feels like we're having some kind of argument, an argument without words. I'm loath to break eye contact.

Finally, she's the one who looks away.

"You want me to stay," she says. "Fine. I'll stay. But I have some conditions of my own."

I expected that. In fact, I'd expected that earlier, when she'd first come to my quarters, not this prolonged discussion about destroying the wreck.

"Name them."

"I'm done diving," she says. "I'm not going near that thing, not even to save lives."

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"All right."

"But I'll man the skip, if you let me bring some of my medical supplies."

So far, I see no problems. "All right."

"And if something goes wrong—and it will—I reserve the right to give my notes, both audio and digital, to any necessary authorities. I reserve the right to tell them what we found and how I warned you. I reserve the right to tell them that you're the one responsible for everything that happens."

"I *am* the one responsible," I say. "But the entire group has signed off on the hazards of wreck diving. Death is one of the risks."

A lopsided smile fills her face, but doesn't reach her eyes. The smile itself seems like sarcasm.

"Yeah," she says as if she's never heard me make that speech before. "I suppose it is."

I tell the others that Squishy has some concerns about the stealth tech and wants to operate as our medic instead of as a main diver. No one questions that. Such things happen on long dives—someone gets squeamish about the wreck; or terrified of the dark; or nearly dies and decides to give up wreck-diving then and there.

We're a superstitious bunch when it gets down to it. We put on our gear in the same order each and every time; we all have one piece of equipment we shouldn't but we feel we need just to survive; and we like to think there's something watching over us, even if it's just a pile of luck and an ancient diving belt.

The upside of Squishy's decision is that I get to dive the wreck. I have a good pilot, although not a great one, manning the skip, and I know that she'll make sensible decisions. She'll never impulsively come in to save a team member. She's said so, and I know she means it.

The downside is that she's a better diver than I am. She'd find things I never would; she'd see things I'll never see; she'd avoid things I don't even know are dangerous.

Which is why, on my first dive to that wreck, I set myself up with Turtle, the most experienced member of the dive team after Squishy.

The skip ride over is tense: those two have gone beyond not talking into painful and outspoken silence. I spend most of my time going over and over my equipment looking for flaws. Much as I want to dive this wreck—and I have since the first moment I saw her—I'm scared of the deep and the dark and the unknown. Those first few instants of weightlessness always catch me by surprise, always remind me that what I do is somehow unnatural.

Still, we get to our normal spot, I suit up, and somehow I make it through those first few minutes, zip along the tether with Turtle just a few meters ahead of me, and make my way to the hatch.

Turtle's gonna take care of the recording and the tracking for this trip. She knows the wreck is new to me. She's been inside once now, and so has Karl. Junior and Jypé had the dive before this one.

I've assigned three corridors: one to Karl, one to J&J, and one to Turtle. Once we discover what's at the end of those babies, we'll take a few more. I'm floating; I'll take the corridor of the person I dive with.

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Descending into the hatch is trickier than it looks on the recordings. The edges are sharper; I have to be careful about where I put my hands.

Gravity isn't there to pull at me. I can hear my own breathing, harsh and insistent, and I wonder if I shouldn't have taken Squishy's advice: a ten/ten/ten split on my first dive instead of a twenty/twenty/twenty. It takes less time to reach the wreck now; we get inside in nine minutes flat. I would've had time to do a bit of acclimatizing and to have a productive dive the next time.

But I hadn't been thinking that clearly, obviously. I'd been more interested in our corridor, hoping it led to the control room, whatever that was.

Squishy had been thinking, though. Before I left, she tanked me up with one more emergency bottle. She remembered how on my first dives after a long lay-off, I used too much oxygen.

She remembered that I sometimes panic.

I'm not panicked now, just excited. I have all my exterior suit lights on, trying to catch the various nooks and crannies of the hatch tube that leads into the ship.

Turtle's not far behind. Because I'm lit up like a tourist station, she's not using her boot lights. She's letting me set the pace, and I'm probably setting it a little too fast.

We reach the corridors in at 11:59. Turtle shows me our corridor at 12:03. We take off down the notched hallway at 12:06, and I'm giddy as a child on her first space walk.

Giddy we have to watch. Giddy can be the first sign of oxygen deprivation, followed by a healthy disregard for safety.

But I don't mention this giddy. I've had it since Squishy bowed off the teams, and the giddy's grown worse as my dive day got closer. I'm a little concerned—extreme emotion adds to the heavy breathing—but I'm going to trust my suit. I'm hoping it'll tell me if the oxygen's too low, the pressure's off, or the environmental controls are about to fail.

The corridor is human-sized and built for full gravity. Apparently no one thought of adding rungs along the side or the ceiling in case the environmental controls fail.

To me, that shows an astonishing trust in technology, one I've always read about but have never seen. No ship designed in the last three hundred years lacks clingholds. No ship lacks emergency oxygen supplies spaced every ten meters or so. No ship lacks communications equipment near each door.

The past feels even farther away than I thought it would. I thought once I stepped inside the wreck—even though I couldn't smell the environment or hear what's going on around me—I'd get a sense of what it would be like to spend part of my career in this place.

But I have no sense. I'm in a dark, dreary hallway that lacks the emergency supplies I'm used to. Turtle's moving slower than my giddy self wants, although my cautious, experienced boss self knows that slow is best.

She's finding handholds, and signaling me for them, like we're climbing the outside of an alien vessel. We're working on an ancient system—the lead person touches a place, deems it safe, uses it to push off, and the rest of the team follows.

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There aren't as many doors as I would have expected. A corridor, it seems to me, needs doors funneling off it, with the occasional side corridor bisecting it.

But there are no bisections, and every time I think we're in a tunnel not a corridor, a door does appear. The doors are regulation height, even now, but recessed farther than I'm used to.

Turtle tries each door. They're all jammed or locked. At the moment, we're just trying to map the wreck. We'll pry open the difficult places once the map is finished.

But I'd love to go inside one of those closed off spaces, probably as much as she would.

Finally, she makes a small scratch on the side of the wall, and nods at me.

The giddy fades. We're done. We go back now—my rule—and if you get back early so be it. I check my readout: 29:01. We have ten minutes to make it back to the hatch.

I almost argue for a few more minutes, even though I know better. Sure, it didn't take us as long to get here as it had in the past, but that doesn't mean the return trip is going to be easy. I've lost four divers over the years because they made the mistake I wanted to make now.

I let Turtle pass me. She goes back, using the same push-off points as before. As she does that, I realize she's marked them somehow, probably with something her suit can pick up. My equipment's not that sophisticated, but I'm glad hers is. We need that kind of expertise inside this wreck. It might take us weeks just to map the space, and we can expect each other to remember each and every safe touch spot because of it.

When we get back to the skip and I drop my helmet, Squishy glares at me.

"You had the gids," she says.

"Normal excitement," I say.

She shakes her head. "I see this coming back the next time, and you're grounded."

I nod, but know she can't ground me without my permission. It's my ship, my wreck, my job. I'll do what I want.

I take off the suit, indulge in some relaxation while Squishy pilots. We didn't get much, Turtle and I, just a few more meters of corridor mapped, but it feels like we'd discovered a whole new world.

Maybe that is the gids, I don't know. But I don't think so. I think it's just the reaction of an addict who returns to her addiction—an elation so great that she needs to do something with it besides acknowledge it.

And this wreck. This wreck has so many possibilities.

Only I can't discuss them on the skip, not with Squishy at the helm and Turtle across from me. Squishy hates this project, and Turtle's starting to. Her enthusiasm is waning, and I don't know if it's because of her personal war with Squishy or because Squishy has convinced her the wreck is even more dangerous than usual.

I stare out a portal, watching the wreck grow tinier and tinier in the distance. It's ironic. Even though I'm surrounded by tension, I finally feel content.

* * *

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Half a dozen more dives, maybe sixty more meters, mostly corridor. One potential storage compartment, which we'd initially hoped was a stateroom or quarters, and a mechanic's corridor, filled with equipment we haven't even begun to catalogue.

I spend my off-hours analyzing the materials. So far, nothing conclusive. Lots of evidence of cobbling, but that's pretty common for any ship—with FTL or not—that's made it on a long journey.

What there's no evidence of are bodies. We haven't found a one, and that's even more unusual. Sometimes there're skeletons floating—or pieces of them at least—and sometimes we get the full-blown corpse, suited and intact. A handful aren't suited. Those are the worst. They always make me grateful we can't smell the ship around us.

The lack of bodies is beginning to creep out Karl. He's even talked to me in private about skipping the next few dives.

I'm not sure what's best. If he skips them, the attitudes might become engrained, and he might not dive again. If he goes, the fears might grow worse and paralyze him in the worst possible place.

I move him to the end of the rotation, and warn Squishy she might have to suit up after all.

She just looks at me and grins. "Too many of the team quit on you, you'll just have to go home."

"I'll dive it myself, and you all can wait," I say, but it's bravado and we both know it.

That wreck isn't going to defeat me, not with the perfect treasure hidden in its bulk.

That's what's fueling my greed. The perfect treasure: *my* perfect treasure. Something that answers previously unasked historical questions—previously unknown historical questions; something that will reveal facts about our history, our humanity, that no one has suspected before; and something that, even though it does all that, is worth a small—physical—fortune.

I love the history part. I get paid a lot of money to ferry people to other wrecks, teach them to dive old historical sites. Then I save up my funds and do this: find new sites that no one else knows about, and mine them for history.

I never expected to mine them for real gold as well.

I shake every time I think about it, and before each dive, I do feel the gids. Only now I report them to Squishy. I tell her that I'm a tad too excited, and she offers me a tranq that I always refuse. Never go into the unknown with senses dulled, that's my motto, even though I know countless people who do it.

We're on a long diving mission, longer than some of these folks have ever been on, and we're not even halfway through. We'll have gids and jitters and too many superstitions. We'll have fears and near-emergencies, and God forbid, real emergencies as well.

We'll get through it, and we'll have our prize, and no one, not any one person, will be able to take that away from us.

It turned this afternoon.

I'm captaining the skip. Squishy's back at the *Business*, taking a boss-

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ordered rest. I'm tired of her complaints and her constant negative attitude. At first, I thought she'd turn Turtle, but Turtle finally got pissed, and decided she'd enjoy this run.

I caught Squishy ragging on J&J, my strong links, asking them if they really want to be mining a death ship. They didn't listen to her, not really—although Jypé argued with her just a little—but that kind of talk can depress an entire mission, sabotage it in subtle little ways, ways that I don't even want to contemplate.

So I'm manning the skip alone, while J&J are running their dive, and I'm listening to the commentary, not looking at the grainy nearly worthless images from the handheld. Mostly I'm thinking about Squishy and how to send her back without sending information too and I can't come to any conclusions at all when I hear:

"... yeah, it opens." Junior.

"Wow." Jypé.

"Jackpot, eh?" Junior again.

And then a long silence. Much too long for my tastes, not because I'm afraid for J&J, but because a long silence doesn't tell me one goddamn thing.

I punch up the digital readout, see we're at 25:33—plenty of time. They got to the new section faster than they ever have before.

The silence runs from 25:33 to 28:46, and I'm about to chew my fist off, wondering what they're doing. The handheld shows me grainy walls and more grainy walls. Or maybe it's just grainy nothing. I can't tell.

For the first time in weeks, I want someone else in the skip with me just so that I can talk to somebody.

"Almost time," Jypé says.

"Dad, you gotta see this." Junior has a touch of breathlessness in his voice. Excitement—at least that's what I'm hoping.

And then there's more silence ... thirty-five seconds of it, followed by a loud and emphatic "Fuck!"

I can't tell if that's an angry "fuck," a scared "fuck," or an awed "fuck." I can't tell much about it at all.

Now I'm literally chewing on my thumbnail, something I haven't done in years, and I'm watching the digital, which has crept past thirty-one minutes.

"Move your arm," Jypé says, and I know then that wasn't a good fuck at all.

Something happened.

Something bad.

"Just a little to the left," Jypé says again, his voice oddly calm. I'm wondering why Junior isn't answering him, hoping that the only reason is he's in a section where the communications relay isn't reaching the skip.

Because I can think of a thousand other reasons, none of them good, that Junior's communication equipment isn't working.

"We're five minutes past departure," Jypé says, and in that, I'm hearing the beginning of panic.

More silence.

I'm actually holding my breath. I look out a portal, see nothing except

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the wreck, looking like it always does. The handheld has been showing the same grainy image for a while now.

37:24

If they're not careful, they'll run out of air. Or worse.

I try to remember how much extra they took. I didn't really watch them suit up this time. I've seen their ritual so many times that I'm not sure what I think I saw is what I actually saw. I'm not sure what they have with them, and what they don't.

"Great," Jypé says, and I finally recognize his tone. It's controlled parental panic. Sound calm so that the kid doesn't know the situation is bad. "Keep going."

I'm holding my breath, even though I don't have to. I'm holding my breath and looking back and forth between the portal and the handheld image. All I see is the damn wreck and that same grainy image.

"We got it," Jypé says. "Now careful. Careful—son of a bitch! Move, move, move—ah, hell."

I stare at the wreck, even though I can't see inside it. My own breath sounds as ragged as it did inside the wreck. I glance at the digital:

44:11

They'll never get out in time. They'll never make it, and I can't go in for them. I'm not even sure where they are.

"C'mon." Jypé is whispering now. "C'mon son, just one more, c'mon, help me, c'mon."

The "help me" wasn't a request to a hearing person. It was a comment. And I suddenly know.

Junior's trapped. He's unconscious. His suit might even be ripped. It's over for Junior.

Jypé has to know it on some deep level.

Only he also has to know it on the surface, in order to get out.

I reach for my own communicator before I realize there's no talking to them inside the wreck. We'd already established that the skip doesn't have the power to send, for reasons I don't entirely understand. We've tried boosting power through the skip's diagnostic, and even with the *Business*'s diagnostic, and we don't get anything.

I judged we didn't need it, because what can someone inside the skip do besides encourage?

"C'mon, son." Jypé grunts. I don't like that sound.

The silence that follows lasts thirty seconds, but it seems like forever. I move away from the portal, stare at the digital, and watch the numbers change. They seem to change in slow-motion:

45:24 to

. . . 25 to

. . . 2 . . . 6 . . .

to

. . . 2 . . . . . 7 . . .

until I can't even see them change any more.

Another grunt, and then a sob, half-muffled, and another, followed by—

"Is there any way to send for help? Boss?"

I snap to when I hear my name. It's Jypé and I can't answer him.

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I can't answer him, dammit.

I can call for help, and I do. Squishy tells me that the best thing I can do is get the survivor—her word, not mine, even though I know it's obvious too—back to the *Business* as quickly as possible.

"No sense passing midway, is there?" she asks, and I suppose she's right.

But I'm cursing her—after I get off the line—for not being here, for failing us, even though there's not much she can do, even if she's here, in the skip. We don't have a lot of equipment, medical equipment, back at the *Business*, and we have even less here, not that it mattered, because most of the things that happen are survivable if you make it back to the skip.

Still, I suit up. I promise myself I'm not going to the wreck, I'm not going to help with Junior, but I can get Jypé along the guideline if he needs me too.

"Boss. Call for help. We need Squishy and some divers and oh, shit, I don't know."

His voice sounds too breathy. I glance at the digital.

56:24

Where has the time gone? I thought he was moving quicker than that. I thought I was too.

But it takes me a while to suit up, and I talked to Squishy, and everything is fucked up.

What'll they say when we get back? The mission's already filled with superstitions and fears of weird technology that none of us really understand.

And only me and Jypé are obsessed with this thing.

Me and Jypé.

Probably just me now.

"I left him some oxygen. I dunno if it's enough . . ."

So breathy. Has Jypé left all his extra? What's happening to Junior? If he's unconscious, he won't use as much, and if his suit is fucked, then he won't need any.

"Coming through the hatch . . ."

I see Jypé, a tiny shape on top of the wreck. And he's moving slowly, much too slowly for a man trying to save his own life.

My rules are clear: let him make his own way back.

But I've never been able to watch someone else die.

I send to the *Business*: "Jypé's out. I'm heading down the line."

I don't use the word help on purpose, but anyone listening knows what I'm doing. They'll probably never listen to me again, but what the hell.

I don't want to lose two on my watch.

When I reach him six minutes later, he's pulling himself along the guideline, hand over hand, so slowly that he barely seems human. A red light flashes at the base of his helmet—the out of oxygen light, dammit. He did use all of his extra for his son.

I grab one small container, hook it to the side of his suit, press the "on" only halfway, knowing too much is as bad as too little.

His look isn't grateful: it's startled. He's so far gone, he hasn't even realized that I'm here.

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I brought a grappler as well, a technology I always said was more dangerous than helpful, and here's the first test of my theory. I wrap Jypé against me, tell him to relax, I got him, and we'll be just fine.

He doesn't. Even though I pry him from the line, his hands still move, one over the other, trying to pull himself forward.

Instead, I yank us toward the skip, moving as fast as I've ever moved. I'm burning oxygen at three times my usual rate according to my suit and I don't really care. I want him inside, I want him safe, I want him *alive*, goddammit.

I pull open the door to the skip. I unhook him in the airlock, and he falls to the floor like an empty suit. I make sure the back door is sealed, open the main door, and drag Jypé inside.

His skin is a grayish blue. Capillaries have burst in his eyes. I wonder what else has burst, what else has gone wrong.

There's blood around his mouth.

I yank off the helmet, his suit protesting my every move.

"I gotta tell you," he says. "I gotta tell you."

I nod. I'm doing triage, just like I've been taught, just like I've done half a dozen times before.

"Set up something," he says. "Record."

So I do, mostly to shut him up. I don't want him wasting more energy. I'm wasting enough for both of us, trying to save him, and cursing Squishy for not getting here, cursing everyone for leaving me on the skip, alone, with a man who can't live, and somehow has to.

"He's in the cockpit," Jypé says.

I nod. He's talking about Junior, but I really don't want to hear it. Junior is the least of my worries.

"Wedged under some cabinet. Looks like—battlefield in there."

That catches me. Battlefield how? Because there are bodies? Or because it's a mess?

I don't ask. I want him to wait, to save his strength, to *survive*.

"You gotta get him out. He's only got an hour's worth, maybe less. Get him out."

Wedged beneath something, stuck against a wall, trapped in the belly of the wreck. Yeah, like I'll get him out. Like it's worth it.

All those sharp edges.

If his suit's not punctured now, it would be by the time I'm done getting the stuff off him. Things have to be piled pretty high to get them stuck in zero-G.

I'll wager the *Business* that Junior's not stuck, not in the literal, gravitational sense. His suit's hung up on an edge. He's losing—he's lost—environment and oxygen, and he's probably been dead longer than his father's been on the skip.

"Get him out." Jypé's voice is so hoarse it sounds like a whisper.

I look at his face. More blood.

"I'll get him," I say.

Jypé smiles. Or tries to. And then he closes his eyes, and I fight the urge to slam my fist against his chest. He's dead and I know it, but some small part of me won't believe it until Squishy declares him.

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"I'll get him," I say again, and this time, it's not a lie.

Squishy declared him the moment she arrived on the skip. Not that it was hard. He'd already sunken in on himself, and the blood—it wasn't something I wanted to think about.

She flew us back. Turtle was in the other skip, and she never came in, just flew back on her own.

I stayed on the floor, expecting Jypé to rise up and curse me for not going back to the wreck, for not trying, even though we all knew—even though he probably had known—that Junior was dead.

When we got back to the *Business*, Squishy took his body to her little medical suite. She's going to make sure he died from suit failure or lack of oxygen or something that keeps the regulators away from us.

Who knows what the hell he actually died of. Panic? Fear? Stupidity?—or maybe that's what I'm doomed for. Hell, I let a man dive with his son, even though I'd ordered all of my teams to abandon a downed man.

Who can abandon his own kid anyway?

And who listens to me?

Not even me.

My quarters seem too small, the *Business* seems too big, and I don't want to go anywhere because everyone'll look at me, with an I-told-you-so followed by a let's-hang-it-up.

And I don't really blame them. Death's the hardest part. It's what we flirt with in deep-dives.

We claim that flirting is partly love.

I close my eyes and lean back on my bunk but all I see are digital readouts. Seconds moving so slowly they seem like days. The spaces between time. If only we can capture that—the space between moments.

If only.

I shake my head, wondering how I can pretend I have no regrets.

When I come out of my quarters, Turtle and Karl are already watching the vids from Jypé's suit. They're sitting in the lounge, their faces serious.

As I step inside, Turtle says, "They found the heart."

It takes me a minute to understand her, then I remember what Jypé said. They were in the cockpit, the heart, the place we might find the stealth tech.

He was stuck there. Like the probe?

I shudder in spite of myself.

"Is the event on the vid?" I ask.

"Haven't got that far." Turtle shuts off the screens. "Squishy's gone."

"Gone?" I shake my head just a little. Words aren't processing well. I'm having a reaction. I recognize it: I've had it before when I've lost crew.

"She took the second skip, and left. We didn't even notice until I went to find her." Turtle sighs. "She's gone."

"Jypé too?" I ask.

She nods.

I close my eyes. The mission ends, then. Squishy'll go to the authorities and report us. She's gonna tell them about the wreck and the accident

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and Junior's death. She's gonna show them Jypé, whom I haven't reported yet because I didn't want anyone to find our position, and the authorities'll come here—whatever authorities have jurisdiction over this area—and confiscate the wreck.

At best, we'll get a slap, and I'll have a citation on my record.

At worst, I'll—maybe we'll—face charges for some form of reckless homicide.

"We can leave," Karl says.

I nod. "She'll report the *Business*. They'll know who to look for."

"If you sell the ship —"

"And what?" I ask. "Not buy another? That'll keep us ahead of them for a while, but not long enough. And when we get caught, we get nailed for the full count, whatever it is, because we acted guilty and ran."

"So, maybe she won't say anything," Karl says, but he doesn't sound hopeful.

"If she was gonna do that, she woulda left Jypé," I say.

Turtle closes her eyes, rests her head on the seat back. "I don't know her any more."

"I think maybe we never did," I say.

"I didn't think she got scared," Turtle says. "I yelled at her—I told her to get over it, that diving's the thing. And she said it's not the thing. Surviving's the thing. She never used to be like that."

I think of the woman sitting on her bunk, staring at her opaque wall—a wall you think you can see through, but you really can't—and wonder. Maybe she always used to be like that. Maybe surviving was always her thing. Maybe diving was how she proved she was alive, until the past caught up with her all over again.

The stealth tech.

She thinks it killed Junior.

I nod toward the screen. "Let's see it," I say to Karl.

He gives me a tight glance, almost—but not quite—expressionless. He's trying to rein himself in, but his fears are getting the best of him.

I'm amazed mine haven't got the best of me.

He starts it up. The voices of men so recently dead, just passing information—"Push off here." "Watch the edge there."—make Turtle open her eyes.

I lean against the wall, arms crossed. The conversation is familiar to me. I heard it just a few hours ago, and I'd been too preoccupied to give it much attention, thinking of my own problems, thinking of the future of this mission, which I thought was going to go on for months.

Amazing how much your perspective changes in the space of a few minutes.

The corridors look the same. It takes a lot so that I don't zone—I've been in that wreck, I've watched similar vids, and in those I haven't learned much. But I resist the urge to tell Karl to speed it up—there can be something, some wrong movement, or piece of the wreck that gloms onto one of my guys—my former guys—before they even get to the heart.

But I don't see anything like that, and since Turtle and Karl are quiet, I assume they don't see anything like that either.

Then J&J find the holy grail. They say something, real casual—which

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I'd missed the first time—a simple "shit, man" in a tone of such awe that if I'd been paying attention, I would've known.

I bite back the emotion. If I took responsibility for each lost life, I'd never dive again. Of course, I might not after this anyway—one of the many options the authorities have is to take my pilot's license away.

The vids don't show the cockpit ahead. They show the same old grainy walls, the same old dark and shadowed corridor. It's not until Jypé turns his suit vid toward the front that the pit's even visible, and then it's a black mass filled with lighter squares, covering the screen.

"What the hell's that?" Karl asks. I'm not even sure he knows he's spoken.

Turtle leans forward and shakes her head. "Never seen anything like it."

Me either. As Jypé gets closer, the images become clearer. It looks like every piece of furniture in the place has become dislodged, and has shifted to one part of the cockpit.

Were the designers so confident of their artificial gravity that they didn't bolt down the permanent pieces? Could any ship's designers be that stupid?

Jypé's vid doesn't show me the floor, so I can't see if these pieces have been ripped free. If they have, then that place is a minefield for a diver, more sharp edges than smooth ones.

My arms tighten in their cross, my fingers forming fists. I feel a tension I don't want—as if I can save both men by speaking out now.

"You got this before Squishy took off, right?" I ask Turtle.

She understands what I'm asking. She gives me a disapproving sideways look. "I took the vids before she even had the suit off."

Technically, that's what I want to hear, and yet it's not what I want to hear. I want something to be tampered with, something to be slightly off, because then, maybe then, Jypé would still be alive.

"Look," Karl says, nodding toward the screen.

I have to force myself to see it. The eyes don't want to focus. I know what happens next—or at least, how it ends up. I don't need the visual confirmation.

Yet I do. The vid can save us, if the authorities come back. Turtle, Karl, even Squishy can testify to my rules. And my rules state that an obviously dangerous site should be avoided. Probes get to map places like this first.

Only I know J&J didn't send in a probe. They might not have because we lost the other so easily, but most likely, it was that greed, the same one which has been affecting me. The tantalizing idea that somehow, this wreck, with its ancient secrets, is the dive of a lifetime—the discovery of a lifetime.

And the hell of it is, beneath the fear and the panic and the anger—more at myself than at Squishy for breaking our pact—that greed remains.

I'm thinking, if we can just get the stealth tech before the authorities arrive, it'll all be worth it. We'll have a chip, something to bargain with.

Something to sell to save our own skins.

Junior goes in. His father doesn't tell him not to. Junior's blurry on the vid—a human form in an environmental suit, darker than the pile of things in the center of the room, but grayer than the black around them.

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And it's Junior who says, "It's open," and Junior who mutters "Wow" and Junior who says, "Jackpot, huh?" when I thought all of that had been a dialogue between them.

He points at a hole in the pile, then heads toward it, but his father moves forward quickly, grabbing his arm. They don't talk—apparently that was the way they worked, such an understanding they didn't need to say much, which makes my heart twist—and together they head around the pile.

The cockpit shifts. It has large screens that appear to be unretractable. They're off, big blank canvases against dark walls. No windows in the cockpit at all, which is another one of those technologically arrogant things—what happens if the screen technology fails?

The pile is truly in the middle of the room, a big lump of things. Why Jypé called it a battlefield, I don't know. Because of the pile? Because everything is ripped up and moved around?

My arms get even tighter, my fists clenched so hard my knuckles hurt.

On the vid, Junior breaks away from his father, and moves toward the front (if you can call it that) of the pile. He's looking at what the pile's attached to.

He mimes removing pieces, and the cameras shake. Apparently Jypé is shaking his head.

Yet Junior reaches in there anyway. He examines each piece before he touches it, then pushes at it, which seems to move the entire pile. He moves in closer, the pile beside him, something I can't see on his other side. He's floating, head first, exactly like we're not supposed to go into one of these spaces—he'd have trouble backing out if there's a problem —

And of course there is.

Was.

"Ah, hell," I whisper.

Karl nods. Turtle puts her head in her hands.

On screen nothing moves.

Nothing at all.

Seconds go by, maybe a minute—I forgot to look at the digital readout from earlier, so I don't exactly know—and then, finally, Jypé moves forward.

He reaches Junior's side, but doesn't touch him. Instead the cameras peer in, so I'm thinking maybe Jypé does too.

And then the monologue begins.

I've only heard it once, but I have it memorized.

Almost time.

Dad, you've gotta see this.

Jypé's suit shows us something—a wave? A blackness? A table?—something barely visible just beyond Junior. Junior reaches for it, and then —

Fuck!

The word sounds distorted here. I don't remember it being distorted, but I do remember being unable to understand the emotion behind it. Was that from the distortion? Or my lack of attention?

Jypé has forgotten to use his cameras. He's moved so close to the objects in the pile that all we can see now are rounded corners and broken metal (apparently these did break off then) and sharp, sharp edges.

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Move your arm.

But I see no corresponding movement. The visuals remain the same, just like they did when I was watching from the skip.

Just a little to the left.

And then:

We're five minutes past departure.

That was panic. I had missed it the first time, but the panic began right there. Right at that moment.

Karl covers his mouth.

On screen, Jypé turns slightly. His hands grasp boots and I'm assuming he's tugging.

Great. But I see nothing to feel great about. Nothing has moved. *Keep going.*

Going where? Nothing is changing. Jypé can see that, can't he?

The hands seem to tighten their grip on the boots, or maybe I'm imagining that because that's what my hands would do.

We got it.

Is that a slight movement? I step away from the wall, move closer to the vid, as if I can actually help.

Now careful.

This is almost worse because I know what's coming, I know Junior doesn't get out, Jypé doesn't survive. I know —

Careful—son of a bitch!

The hands slid off the boot, only to grasp back on. And there's desperation in that movement, and lack of caution, no checking for edges nearby, no standard rescue procedures.

Move, move, move—ah, hell.

This time, the hands stay. And tug—clearly tug—sliding off.

C'mon.

Sliding again.

C'mon son,

And again.

just one more,

And again.

c'mon, help me, c'mon.

Until, finally, in despair, the hands fall off. The feet are motionless, and, to my untrained eye, appear to be in the same position they were in before.

Now Jypé's breathing dominates the sound—which I don't remember at all—maybe that kind of hiss doesn't make it through our patchwork system—and then the vid whirls. He's reaching, grabbing, trying to pull things off the pile, and there's no pulling, everything goes back like it's magnetized.

He staggers backward—all except his hand, which seems attached—sharp edges? No, his suit wasn't compromised—and then, at the last moment, eases away.

Away, backing away, the visuals are still of those boots sticking out of that pile, and I squint, and I wonder—am I seeing other boots? Ones that are less familiar?—and finally he's bumping against walls, losing track of himself.

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He turns, moves away, coming for help even though he has to know I won't help (although I did) and panicked—so clearly panicked. He gets to the end of the corridor, and I wave my hand.

"Turn it off." I know how this plays out. I don't need any more.

None of us do. Besides, I'm the only one watching. Turtle still has her face in her hands, and Karl's eyes are squinched shut, as if he can keep out the horrible experience just by blocking the images.

I grab the controls and shut the damn thing off myself.

Then I slide onto the floor and bow my head. Squishy was right, dammit. She was so right. This ship has stealth tech. It's the only thing still working, that one faint energy signature that attracted me in the first place, and it has killed Junior.

And Jypé.

And if I'd gone in, it would've killed me.

No wonder she left. No wonder she ran. This is some kind of flashback for her, something she feels we can never ever win.

And I'm beginning to think she's right, when a thought flits across my brain.

I frown, flick the screen back on, and search for Jypé's map. He had the system on automatic, so the map goes clear to the cockpit.

I superimpose that map on the exterior, accounting for movement, accounting for change —

And there it is, clear as anything.

The probe, our stuck probe, is pressing against whatever's near Junior's faceplate.

I'm worried about what'll happen if the stealth tech is open to space, and it always has been—at least since I stumbled on the wreck.

Open to space and open for the taking.

Karl's watching me. "What're you gonna do?"

Only that doesn't sound like his voice. It's the greed. It's the greed talking, that emotion I so blithely assumed I didn't have.

Everyone can be snared, just in different ways.

"I don't know what to do," I say. "I have no idea at all."

I go back to my room, sit on the bed, stare at the portal which, mercifully, doesn't show the distant wreck.

I'm out of ideas, out of energy, and out of time.

Squishy and the cavalry'll be here soon, to take the wreck from me, confiscate it, and send it into governmental oblivion.

And then my career is over. No more dives, no more space travel.

No more nothing.

I think I doze once because suddenly I'm staring at Junior's face inside his helmet. His eyes move, ever so slowly, and I realize—in the space of a heartbeat—that he's alive in there: his body's in our dimension, his head on the way to another.

And I know, as plainly as I know that he's alive, that he'll suffer a long and hideous death if I don't help him, so I grab one of the sharp edges—with my bare hands (such an obvious dream)—and slice the side of his suit.

Saving him.

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Damning him.

Condemning him to an even uglier slow death than the one he would otherwise experience.

I jerk awake, nearly hitting my head on the wall. My breath is coming in short gasps. What if the dream is true? What if he is still alive? No one understands interdimensional travel, so he could be, but even if he is, I can do nothing.

Absolutely nothing, without condemning myself.

If I go in and try to free him, I will get caught as surely as he is. So will anyone else.

I close my eyes, but don't lean back to my pillow. I don't want to fall asleep again. I don't want to dream again, not with these thoughts on my mind. The nightmares I'd have, all because stealth tech exists, are terrifying, worse than any I'd had as a child —

And then my breath catches. I open my eyes, rub the sleep from them, think:

This is a Dignity Vessel. Dignity Vessels have stealth tech, unless they've been stripped of them. Squishy described stealth tech to me—and this vessel, this *wreck* has an original version.

Stealth tech has value.

Real value, unlike any wreck I've found before.

I can stake a claim. The time to worry about pirates and privacy is long gone, now.

I get out of bed, pace around the small room. Staking a claim is so foreign to wreck-divers. We keep our favorite wrecks hidden, our best dives secret from pirates and wreck divers and the government.

But I'm not going to dive this wreck. I'm not going in again—none of my people are—and so it doesn't matter that the entire universe knows what I have here.

Except that other divers will come, gold-diggers will try to rob me of my claim—and I can collect fees from anyone willing to mine this, anyone willing to risk losing their life in a long and hideous way.

Or I can salvage the wreck and sell it. The government buys salvage.

If I file a claim, I'm not vulnerable to citations, not even to reckless homicide charges, because everyone knows that mining exacts a price. It doesn't matter what kind of claim you mine, you could still lose some, or all, of your crew.

But best of all, if I stake a claim on that wreck, I can quarantine it—and prosecute anyone who violates the quarantine. I can stop people from getting near the stealth tech if I so choose.

Or I can demand that whoever tries to retrieve it, retrieve Junior's body.

His face rises, unbidden, not the boy I'd known, but the boy I'd dreamed of, half-alive, waiting to die.

I know there are horrible deaths in space. I know that wreck-divers suffer some of the worst.

I carry these images with me, and now, it seems, I'll carry Junior's.

Is that why Jypé made me promise to go in? Had he had the same vision of his son?

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I sit down at the network, and call up the claim form. It's so simple. The key is giving up accurate coordinates. The system'll do a quick double-check to see if anyone else has filed a claim, and if so, an automatic arbitrator will ask if I care to withdraw. If I do not, then the entire thing will go to the nearest court.

My hands itch. This is so contrary to my training.

I start to file—and then stop.

I close my eyes—and he's there again, barely moving, but alive.

If I do this, Junior will haunt me until the end of my life. If I do this, I'll always wonder.

Wreck-divers take silly, unnecessary risks, by definition.

The only thing that's stopping me from taking this one is Squishy and her urge for caution.

Wreck-divers flirt with death.

I stand. It's time for a rendezvous.

Turtle won't go in. She's stressed, terrified, and blinded by Squishy's betrayal. She'd be useless on a dive anyway, not clear-headed enough, and probably too reckless.

Karl has no qualms. His fears have left. When I propose a dive to see what happened in there, he actually grins at me.

"Thought you weren't gonna come around," he says.

But I have.

Turtle mans the skip. Karl and I have gone in. We've decided on 30/40/30, because we're going to investigate that cockpit. Karl theorizes that there's some kind of off switch for the stealth tech, and of course he's right. But the wreck has no real power, and since the designers had too much faith in their technology to build redundant safety systems, I'm assuming they had too much faith to design an off switch for their most dangerous technology, a dead-man's switch that'll allow the stealth tech to go off even if the wreck has no power.

I mention that to Karl and he gives me a startled look.

"You ever wonder what's keeping the stealth tech on then?" he asks.

I've wondered, but I have no answer. Maybe when Squishy comes back with the government ships, maybe then I'll ask her. What my non-scientific mind is wondering is this: Can the stealth tech operate from both dimensions? Is something on the other side powering it?

Is part of the wreck—that hole we found in the hull on the first day, maybe—still in that other dimension?

Karl and I suit up, take extra oxygen, and double-check our suits' environmental controls. I'm not giddy this trip—I'm not sure I'll be giddy again—but I'm not scared, either.

Just coldly determined.

I promised Jypé I was going back for Junior, and now I am.

No matter what the risk.

The trip across is simple, quick, and familiar. Going down the entrance no longer seems like an adventure. We hit the corridors with fifteen minutes to spare.

Jypé's map is accurate to the millimeter. His push-off points are

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marked on the map and with some corresponding glove grip. We make record time as we head toward that cockpit.

Record time, though, is still slow. I find myself wishing for all my senses: sound, smell, taste. I want to know if the effects of the stealth tech have made it out here, if something is off in the air—a bit of a burnt smell, something foreign that raises the small hairs on the back of my neck. I want to know if Junior is already decomposing, if he's part of a group (the crew?) pushed up against the stealth tech, never to go free again.

But the wreck doesn't cough up those kind of details. This corridor looks the same as the other corridor I pulled my way through.

Karl moves as quickly as I do, although his suit lights are on so full that looking at him almost blinds me. That's what I did to Turtle on our trip, and it's a sign of nervousness.

It doesn't surprise me that Karl, who claimed not to be afraid, is nervous. He's the one who had doubts about this trip once he'd been inside the wreck. He's the one I thought wouldn't make it through all of his scheduled dives.

The cockpit looms in front of us, the doors stuck open. It does look like a battlefield from this vantage: the broken furniture, the destruction all cobbled together on one side of the room, like a barricade.

The odd part about it is, though, that the barricade runs from floor to ceiling, and unlike most things in zero-G, seem stuck in place.

Neither Karl nor I give the barricade much time. We've vowed to explore the rest of the cockpit first, looking for the elusive dead-man switch. We have to be careful; the sharp edges are everywhere.

Before we left, we used the visuals from Jypé's suit, and his half-finished map, to assign each other areas of the cockpit to explore. I'm going deep, mostly because this is my idea, and deep—we both feel—is the most dangerous place. It's closest to the probe, closest to that corner of the cockpit where Junior still hangs, horizontal, his boots kicking out into the open.

I go in the center, heading toward the back, not using handholds. I've pushed off the wall, so I have some momentum, a technique that isn't really my strong suit. But I volunteered for this, knowing the edges in the front would slow me down, knowing that the walls would raise my fears to an almost incalculable height.

Instead, I float over the middle of the room, see the uprooted metal of chairs and the ripped shreds of consoles. There are actual wires protruding from the middle of that mess, wires and stripped bolts—something I haven't seen in space before, only in old colonies—and my stomach churns as I move forward.

The back wall is dark, with its distended screen. The cockpit feels like a cave instead of the hub of the Dignity Vessel. I wonder how so many people could have trusted their lives to this place.

Just before I reach the wall, I spin so that I hit it with the soles of my boots. The soles have the toughest material on my suit. The wall is mostly smooth, but there are a few edges here, too—more stripped bolts, a few twisted metal pieces that I have no idea what they once were part of.

This entire place feels useless and dead.

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It takes all of my strength not to look at the barricade, not to search for the bottoms of Junior's boots, not to go there first. But I force myself to shine a spot on the wall before me, then on the floor, and the ceiling, looking for something—anything—that might control part of this vessel.

But whatever had, whatever machinery there'd been, whatever computerized equipment, is either gone or part of that barricade. My work in the back is over quickly, although I take an extra few minutes to record it all, just in case the camera sees something I don't.

It takes Karl a bit longer. He has to pick his way through a tiny debris field. He's closer to a possible site: there's still a console or two stuck to his near wall. He examines them, runs his suit-cam over them as well, but shakes his head.

Even before he tells me he's found nothing, I know.

I know.

I join him at a two-pronged handhold, where his wall and mine meet. The handhold was actually designed for this space, the first such design I've seen on the entire Dignity Vessel.

Maybe the engineers felt that only the cockpit crew had to survive uninjured should the artificial gravity go off. More likely, the lack of grab bars was simply an oversight in the other areas, or a cost-saving measure.

"You see a way into that barricade?" Karl asks.

"We're not going in," I say. "We're going to satisfy my curiosity first."

He knows about the dream; I told him when we were suiting up. I have no idea if Turtle heard—if she did, then she knows too. I don't know how she feels about the superstitious part of this mission, but I know that Karl understands.

"I think we should work off a tether," he says. "We can hook up to this handhold. That way, if one of us gets stuck —"

I shake my head. There are clearly other bodies in that barricade, and I would wager that some of them have tethers and bits of equipment attached.

If the stealth tech is as powerful as I think it is, then these people had no safeguard against it. A handhold won't defend us either, even though, I believe, the stealth tech is running at a small percentage of capacity.

"I'm going first," I say. "You wait. If I pull in, you go back. You and Turtle get out."

We've discussed this drill. They don't like it. They believe leaving me behind will give them two ghosts instead of one.

Maybe so, but at least they'll still be alive to experience those ghosts.

I push off the handhold, softer this time than I did from the corridor, and let the drift take me to the barricade. I turn the front suit-cams on high. I also use zoom on all but a few of them. I want to see as much as I can through that barricade.

My suit lights are also on full. I must look like a child's floaty toy heading in for a landing.

I stop near the spot where Junior went in. His boots are there, floating, like expected. I back as far away from him as I can, hoping to catch a reflection in his visor, but I get nothing.

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I have to move to the initial spot, that hole in the barricade that Junior initially wanted to go through.

I'm more afraid of that than I am of the rest of the wreck, but I do it. I grasp a spot marked on Jypé's map, and pull myself toward that hole.

Then I train the zoom inside, but I don't need it.

I see the side of Junior's face, illuminated by my lights. The helmet is what tells me that it's him. I recognize the modern design, the little logos he glued to its side.

His helmet has bumped against the only intact console in the entire place. His face is pointed downward, the helmet on clear. And through it, I see something I don't expect: the opposite of my fears.

He isn't alive. He hasn't been alive in a long, long time.

As I said, no one understands interdimensional travel, but we suspect it manipulates time. And what I see in front of me makes me realize my hypothesis is wrong:

Time sped up for him. Sped to such a rate that he isn't even recognizable. He's been mummified for so long that the skin looks petrified, and I bet, if we were to somehow free him and take him back to the *Business*, that none of our normal medical tools could cut through the surface of his face.

There are no currents and eddies here, nothing to pull me forward. Still, I scurry back to what I consider a safe spot, not wanting to experience the same fate as the youngest member of our team.

"What is it?" Karl asks me.

"He's gone," I say. "No sense cutting him loose."

Even though cutting isn't the right term. We'd have to free him from that stealth tech, and I'm not getting near it. No matter how rich it could make me, no matter how many questions it answers, I no longer want anything to do with it.

I'm done—with this dive, this wreck—and with my brief encounter with greed.

We do have answers, though, and visuals to present to the government ships when they arrive. There are ten of them—a convoy—unwilling to trust something as precious as stealth tech to a single ship.

Squishy didn't come back with them. I don't know why I thought she would. She dropped off Jypé, reported us and the wreck, and vanished into Longbow Station, not even willing to collect a finder's fee that the government gives whenever it locates unusual technologies.

Squishy's gone, and I doubt she'll ever come back.

Turtle's not speaking to me now, except to say that she's relieved we're not being charged with anything. Our vids showed the government we cared enough to go back for our team member, and also that we had no idea about the stealth tech until we saw it function.

We hadn't gone into the site to raid it, just to explore it—as the earlier vids showed. Which confirmed my claim—I'm a wreck-diver, not a pirate, not a scavenger—and that allowed me to pick up the reward that Squishy abandoned.

I'd've left it too, except that I needed to fund the expedition, and I'm not

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going to be able to do it the way I'd initially planned—by taking tourists to the Dignity Vessel so far from home.

The wreck got moved to some storehouse or warehouse or waystation where the government claims it's safe. Turtle thinks we should've blown it up; Karl's just glad it's out of our way.

Me, I just wish I had more answers to all the puzzles.

That vessel'd been in service a while, that much was clear from how it had been refitted. When someone activated the stealth, something went wrong. I doubt even the government scientists will find out exactly what's in that mess.

Then there's the question of how it got to the place I found it. There's no way to tell if it traveled in stealth mode over those thousands of years, although that doesn't explain how the ship avoided gravity wells and other perils that lie in wait in a cold and difficult universe. Or maybe it had been installed with an updated FTL. Again, I doubt I will ever know.

As for the crew—I have no idea, except that I suspect the cockpit crew died right off. We could see them in that pile of debris. But the rest—there were no bodies scattered throughout the ship, and there could've been, given that the vessel is still intact after all this time.

I'm wondering if they were running tests with minimal crew or if the real crew looked at that carnage in the cockpit and decided, like we did, that it wasn't worth the risk to go in.

I never looked for escape pods, but such things existed on Dignity Vessels. Maybe the rest of the crew bailed, got rescued, and blended into cultures somewhere far from home.

Maybe that's where Jypé's legends come from.

Or so I like to believe.

Longbow Station has never seemed so much like home. It'll be nice to shed the silent Turtle, and Karl, who claims his diving days are behind him.

Mine are too, only in not quite the same way. The *Business* and I'll still ferry tourists to various wrecks, promising scary dives and providing none.

But I've had enough of undiscovered wrecks and danger for no real reason. Curiosity sent me all over this part of space, looking for hidden pockets, places where no one has been in a long time.

Now that I've found the ultimate hidden pocket—and I've seen what it can do—I'm not looking any more. I'm hanging up my suit and reclaiming my land legs.

Less danger there, on land, in normal gravity. Not that I'm afraid of wrecks now. I'm not, no more than the average spacer.

I'm more afraid of that feeling, the greed, which came on me hard and fast, and made me tone-deaf to my best diver's concerns, my old friend's fears, and my own giddy response to the deep.

I'm getting out before I turn pirate or scavenger, before my greed—which I thought I didn't have—draws me as inexorably as the stealth tech drew Junior, pulling me in and holding me in place, before I even realize I'm in trouble.

Before I even know how impossible it'll be to escape. ○

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

PARADOX
Book One of the
Nulapeiron Sequence
by John Meaney
Pyr (Prometheus), $25.00 (hc)
ISBN: 1-59102-308-4

Prometheus Books, a publisher best known for scientific and philosophical titles, launches its science fiction imprint by picking up a John Meaney series first published in England in 2000. Given the parent company's emphasis on free inquiry and critical thinking, it's not surprising that Pyr's initial offering treats the theme of rebellion against unjust authority.

We meet Tom Corcorigan as a young boy living in a tightly regulated society in which his family inhabits one of the lower rungs. The world they inhabit apparently consists of multiple underground shells, with the lower classes literally toward the bottom of the stack. Of course, from Tom's point of view, much of this is simply the way things are—at first.

But his world changes when he meets a strange woman, who gives him a curious data-crystal. Young as he is, Tom knows already that he cannot let anyone else learn about her; almost immediately after meeting her, he is questioned by the militia, but allowed to go home when they decide he knows nothing.

Then, helping his father set up shop in the open market at the center of their level, Tom sees the woman again, this time the prisoner of a squad of militia. When she breaks her manacles—apparently almost by magic—and flees, Tom's father identifies her as a pilot. Just as it appears that she'll escape to safety, the guards shoot her down.

After this mysterious opening, we slowly learn more about Tom's world, Nulapeiron. An Oracle—clearly an all-powerful being whose whim is law—takes Tom's mother away. Shortly thereafter, Tom's father falls ill and wastes away. Tom makes a few friends who recognize that he has something beyond the ordinary about him, but with no parents and no way to make a living, the only thing to be done with him is to send him to school. There, Tom begins to learn that the crystal he was given by the Pilot contains a course of education—and the story of a girl who became one of the first pilots. Hooked, he begins to solve the puzzles in order to follow the story.

And then his life changes again. On an expedition away from school, one of the boys steals a garment, then hands it off to Tom as pursuit arrives. Caught red-handed, Tom is tried in the presence of a noble lady. The usual sentence for his crime is execution; Tom concocts an argument that impresses the lady and her beautiful daughter, Sylvana, whom Tom had seen earlier. The two ladies are in need of a spare servant, so they ask that Tom be spared and given to them. His punishment is reduced to the loss of an arm.

Now Tom must learn the ways of the aristocracy as one of their servants. Again, his quick mind gives him an advantage, and he soon be-

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comes a trusted servant . . . but there's way too much plot to summarize here. Suffice it to say that Meaney takes his protagonist through the entire fabric of the elaborate society he has built, and in the end Tom has shaken Nulapeiron to its foundations.

Summarized flatly, this sounds like a more or less standard plot of growing up in a strange futuristic world; anyone from Fred Pohl to Anne McCaffrey could have written something from the same outline. But of course Meaney has his own twists to bring to the story, beginning with a stronger than usual ability to convey what class differences mean to a boy growing up in a rigid society. He is particularly good at showing the visual elements of Tom's surroundings, as well, from the open marketplace on his home level to the squalid school to the brilliant homes of the aristocracy. And he has a rare ability to convey a sense of strangeness, the most essential quality for someone creating new worlds.

Two more volumes of the Nulapeiron sequence have been published in England, and *Paradox* was shortlisted for the BSFA Award. Prometheus Books have scored a coup in obtaining the series to open their new SF imprint; let's hope they bring the rest of the sequence to us without delay.

THE HIDDEN FAMILY
by Charles Stross
Tor, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-765-31347-2

Stross continues the story begun in *The Family Trade*, reviewed in this column a few months ago.

Miriam Beckstein, a tech-oriented journalist in our world, has discovered that she is a member of the ruling class of a parallel world, in which a feudal society inhabits North America. The clan of which she is a member has the power of movement between worlds, and has exploited it to make vast sums by smuggling illegal commodities—gold, drugs, etc.—between worlds.

As this second part begins, Miriam has returned to our world after escaping two assassination attempts. In the process, she has learned that another parallel world exists, from which at least one group of assassins came. She has brought with her Brilliana D'Ost, a young woman from the medieval society whose life is also in danger, and who has absolutely no experience in the modern world. Miriam's main allies are her secretary Paulette, now using her paralegal training, and her mother Iris, who acquired several useful skills as a counterculture fugitive during the seventies. But Miriam needs to learn quickly who's trying to kill her—and why—if she's going to survive much longer.

The most obvious source of that information is the third parallel world, which Miriam believes she can enter with the help of an elaborate design etched on a locket one of the assassins was carrying—the design differing subtly from the one that lets her navigate between her own world and medieval America. She makes preparations, then makes the attempt—and sure enough, finds herself in a new world, this one equivalent in technology to the late Victorian era, but with different political and social background.

In particular, the third world is rigidly hierarchical, with an English king in America, and most of Europe under the control of the French. The police are vigilant in their search for enemies of the crown, especially

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anyone promoting the radical notion of democratic rule. And while women are not powerless, their rights are tightly restricted. Here Miriam begins to lay her plans for an alternative to the clan's way of accumulating wealth: introducing advanced technology and acquiring the patents for its manufacture. But of course, the police are wary of her, and she must keep in mind that someone in this world sent the assassins that she barely escaped in the medieval world. . . .

And while all this is going on, the leaders of the clan are playing their own political games, which (for the moment) involve letting Miriam have plenty of rope. But their enemies are also at work, anxious to discredit their claim that Miriam is the lost heiress. And unknown to both factions is the existence of the third reality—although Miriam has begun to suspect just who the power is that has been sending the assassins.

Underlying all the plot complexities is Miriam's recognition that only an economically sound strategy can let her break through the rigid social structures in the two alternate worlds. Here is where Stross brings a new dimension of realism to the (by now) well-worn trope of alternate Americas with differing social systems. Miriam's success depends not on better weapons or clever tricks, but on a clear analysis and careful manipulation of the economic engines of the two societies she wishes to change. That is a rare commodity in fantasy, and it's good to see it being put to use here.

A second way in which Stross steps outside the conventions of the genre is that he has constructed an action plot in which all the central characters are women. The men aren't without power, nor are they passive; but practically all the significant positive actions in the story are made by the women: Miriam, Paulette, Brill, and Iris all have important contributions to make. And while the men are by no means uninteresting or stereotypical, they are all basically supporting characters. Even Roland, Miriam's ally and lover from the medieval world, is essentially an ornamental character, once he has taught Miriam what she needs to survive in the alternate world. And this feminization of the cast is done subtly enough that I didn't notice it until my wife drew my attention to it after she devoured both volumes in a couple of days while recovering from the flu.

A roaring good read, and a thinking person's fantasy both in one—Stross just keeps getting better.

NEBULA AWARDS SHOWCASE 2005
Edited by Jack Dann
Roc, $14.95 (tp)
ISBN: 0-451-46015-4

Jack Dann edits the latest installment of SFWA's annual collection built around the Nebula awards; this volume celebrates the awards given in 2004. Chosen by the writing members of the organization, the Nebulas are the only peer awards in the SF/fantasy field.

As usual, the contents center on the Nebulas, with complete texts of two of the winners (Karen Joy Fowler's "What I Didn't See," and Jeffrey Ford's "The Empire of Ice Cream"—short story and novelette, respectively). The winning novel, Elizabeth Moon's *The Speed of Dark*, and novella, Neil Gaiman's "Coraline," both published in book form, are represented by excerpts; in addition, Moon contributes a brief but

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powerful memoir on her novel's growing out of the author's experience as the mother of an autistic child.

There's a healthy selection from the other finalists, with stories by Richard Bowes, James Van Pelt, Carol Emshwiller, Molly Gloss, Cory Doctorow, Eleanor Arnason, Adam-Troy Castro, and Harlan Ellison. (As usual, several of the stories originally appeared in the pages of this magazine.) There are also appreciations of, and stories by, Author Emeritus Charles Harness and SFWA's 2005 Grand Master, Robert Silverberg. Readers who get a kick out of short fiction will get their money's worth just from the stories. And fans of SF poetry will enjoy the winners of the Rhysling Awards.

But that's far from all—the Nebula volumes have always offered added value over and above a collection of good fiction. Dann has gotten several influential writers to comment on current "movements" in the field. Bruce Sterling offers an overview, then China Mieville, Paul McAuley, Ellen Kushner, and Jeff VanderMeer delineate their particular takes on the current state of things: "New Weird," "New Space Opera," "Interstitial," and "Romantic Underground." Like all attempts to pigeonhole writing (e.g., "New Wave" or "Cyberpunk"), these labels serve best as shorthand ways of suggesting that X, Y, and Z all seem to be doing something similar, and if you like the way one of them writes, you might like some of the others, too.

The most unusual piece here is a memoir by Barry Malzberg concerning his years with the legendary Scott Meredith Literary Agency. The Meredith Agency, as Malzberg explains, consisted of two operations: a "normal" literary agency that made its money by selling its clients' work to publishers and taking a commission; and the "fee agency," which provided canned manuscript critiques for a price. Malzberg was just one of several SF writers who worked for the agency—Norman Spinrad, Damon Knight, and James Blish all took home its paychecks, as did Donald Westlake, Evan Hunter, Lawrence Block, and several other successful writers in a variety of genres. And while many seasoned writers will already have arrived at the pessimistic conclusions Malzberg derives from his time at the agency, his account of that unmatchably sordid experience should be required reading for prospective writers, editors, and agents. Priceless.

Finally, the book includes a brief history of the Nebulas, a list of previous winners, and a short piece on SFWA aimed at prospective members. All good stuff—but if you have even the foggiest notion of "becoming a writer," the Malzberg is worth the price all by itself.

ODYSSEUS ON THE RHINE
by Edward S. Louis
Five Star, $25.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-59414-281-5

Here's a sequel to the Odyssey, sending the wiliest of the Greek heroes on a quest into the northern reaches of the (then) known world.

Louis picks up the story almost immediately after Odysseus has won his battle against Penelope's suitors, and taken charge of his kingdom again. But the hero's happiness is short-lived, as his faithful wife sickens, then dies. And his dutiful son Telemachos seems quite capable of running Ithaka by himself. There's no need for the old hero any more, and Odysseus begins to think about sailing off once more in search of some new adventure.

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Luckily, at just this point, a ship appears off shore, carrying an old comrade-in-arms: Diomedes, bearing rumors from afar. After the fall of Troy, say the rumors, some of the Trojan allies escaped to the far north, where they now rule new kingdoms in a land of golden-haired maidens. They brought with them enough wealth to set themselves up as near-gods. The local barbarians call them the Aesir.

This is all the incentive Odysseus needs to wind up his affairs and take to the seas again. Gathering a small company of old companions from the Trojan war and young would-be heroes (the grandson of Achilles among them), Odysseus and Dimoedes set off.

The ship first stops in Sicily, where Odysseus settles his long-standing quarrel with Poseidon, not without paying a price. Then they head up the west coast of Italy, passing the sirens once again, and resisting the equally strong temptation to raid Aeneas's new Trojan colony in Rome. After a final stop in Corsica, where they leave behind several wounded companions, they set out for the mouth of the Rhone, the easiest corridor into the heart of Europe.

Here the story, so far a relatively convincing recreation of the Homeric era, begins to take on new color. As the heroes move north and east, they begin to encounter new and exotic breeds of barbarians—people most readers will recognize as the ancestors of the Celts and Germans. Although the lure of revenge and loot is strong, Odysseus makes his companions take their journey by stages, gathering intelligence as they go. This gives the reader a guided tour of Bronze Age Europe, as well as giving the heroes a chance to adapt to local conditions and make allies along the way.

Louis eventually gets Odysseus and his crew to the land of the Aesir, after adventures including an encounter with the Lorelei. At the same time, he drops hints of the outcome—Odysseus's wound at the hands of Poseideon is one of them—and plays entertaining games as he works to blend Homeric and Norse mythology. An amusing wild card is Orestes, driven mad by the gods, who sings bits of nonsense—at least to the Greeks—that readers will recognize as coming from the far future of the world the characters inhabit.

Off-beat fantasy that combines mythology, anthropology, and a healthy sense of humor; worth looking up.

BIG BANG:
The Origin of the Universe
by Simon Singh
4th (Harper/Collins), $26.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-00-716220-0

Singh, one of the liveliest current science writers, takes on the biggest of subjects—the origin of everything—with an eye to both the science and the history behind the theory most scientists now accept as the likeliest explanation of how the universe began.

Singh starts with origin myths from all over the world, then turns (as scientific histories inevitably must) to the Greeks. A bias against experiment meant that their philosophies too often neglected actual data. But even the oft-maligned Ptolemy (ca. 200 CE) managed to produce a description of the solar system that prevailed until the mid-1500s, when Copernicus's system, eventually backed by Tycho Brahe's mountains of data and Galileo's telescopic observations, knocked it off the hill.

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Eventually Newton's gravitational theory gave the Copernican universe a sound mathematical foundation, and astronomy could at last call itself a science.

But as astronomy opened the doors to the universe, scientists inevitably found themselves more and more puzzles to explain. A key point came in the early 1920s when the Russian mathematician Alexander Friedman demonstrated that Einstein's General Relativity (a correction and expansion of Newtonian gravity) was consistent with an expanding universe. Einstein at first contested this, but within a few years, Edwin Hubble's observations that the light of distant galaxies showed a red shift effectively settled the question. Soon thereafter, the Belgian astronomer Georges Lemaitre offered the obvious suggestion: that the universe had originated in a single point at some time in the distant past.

The job of refining Lemaitre's suggestion into a coherent theory was largely carried out in the 1940s by George Gamow and his student Ralph Alpher. Meanwhile, Fred Hoyle and Thomas Gold were developing a rival "Steady State" theory, arguing that the universe's expansion was the result of new matter being created from the vacuum, with no single point of origin in either space or time. This elegant theory began to collapse when, in the early 1960s, radio telescopes detected residual radiation from the Big Bang, winning Nobel prizes for the scientists responsible for the Big Bang theory.

Singh does a fine job of summarizing the scientific debates, giving credit to several figures who have been short-changed by scientific history. (Alpher and Hoyle are two who probably deserved Nobels—and yes, this is the same Fred Hoyle whose SF novels many of you undoubtedly remember.) The scientists were often colorful and controversial characters in their own right—Gamow in particular was a born showman—and Singh brings them alive, warts and all.

At this point, the Big Bang is establishment science, and the frontiers have moved on again—inflation, string theory, branes, and other refinements now hold center stage and generate most of the heat in scientific debate. But Singh has also provided a good foundation for readers who want to explore physics beyond the Big Bang—as well as a fascinating portrait of world-class scientists at work. Recommended. ○

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SF Conventional Calendar

I'm Fan Guest of Honor at AstronomiCon next month. If you're there, say hello. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, infoon fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll callback on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 2005

14–16—**CapClave.** For info, write: **7113 Wayne Dr., Annandale VA 22003.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) xxxx.xxx. (E-mail) xxxx@xxxx.xxx.** Con will be held in: Washington DC area (if city omitted, same as in address) at the hotel to be announced. Guests will include: Howard Waldrop, the Nielsen Haydens, Gardner Dozois.

21–23—**MileHiCon. (303) 657-5912. lindanel@ix.netcom.com.** Four Points Sheraton, Denver CO. A. D. Foster, Mattingly.

21–23—**ZebraCon. karenzcon@aol.com.** Renaissance Chicago North Shore Hotel, Northbrook (Chicago) IL.

28–30—**NecronomiCon, Box 2213, Plant City FL 33564. stonehill.org/necro.html.** Tampa East Crowne Plaza, Tampa FL.

28–30—**HallowCon, c/o Stacy, 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741. hallowcon.com.** Chattanooga TN. M. Martinez.

28–31—**Cult TV, Box 1701, Wolverhampton WV4 4WT, UK. (+44) 01733-205009. festival@cult.tv.** Birmingham UK.

NOVEMBER 2005

3–6—**World Fantasy Con, Box 531, Madison WI 53523. worldfantasy.org.** Concourse Hotel. Joyce, Windling, Straub.

11–13—**AstronomiCon, Box 31701, Rochester NY 14603. (585) 342-4697. astronomicon.info.** Clarion. F.J. Ackerman.

11–13—**United Fan Con, 26 Darrell Dr., Randolph MA 02368. (781) 986-8735. unitedfancon.com.** Springfield MA.

11–13—**VulKon, Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441-8735. vulkon.com.** Orlando FL. Commercial event.

11–13—**NovaCon, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. (0114) 281-1572.** Quality, Walsall UK. Alastair Reynolds.

11–13—**ArmadaCon, 4 Gleneagle Ave., Mannamead PL3 5HL, UK.** Novatel Hotel, Plymouth UK. Guest of Honor TBA.

17–20—**GenCon, 120 Lakeside Av. #100, Seattle WA 98122. (206) 957-3976.** Anaheim CA. Big game con's west branch.

25–27—**LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., North Hollywood CA 91601. (818) 760-9234. loscon.org.** Hilton, Burbank CA.

25–27—**Darkover, c/o Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. jaelle@radix.net.** Holiday Inn, Timonium (Baltimore) MD.

DECEMBER 2005

2–4—**PhilCon, Box 3, Oreland PA 19075. philcon.org.** Philadelphia PA area. Guests TBA. Their 70th year (from 1936).

JANUARY 2006

6–8—**GAFilk, 890-F Atlanta #150, Roswell GA 30075. gafilk.org.** Ramada, College Park GA. SF/fantasy folksinging.

13–15—**Arisia, 1 Kendall Sq. #322, Bldg. 600, Cambridge MA 02139. arisia.org.** Parl Plaza, Boston MA. Allen Steele.

27–29—**VeriCon, HRSFA, 4 Univ. Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. vericon.org.** Harvard University. G.R.R. Martin.

FEBRUARY 2006

9–12—**CapriCon, Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660. capricon.org.** Sheraton, Arlington Hts. (Chicago) IL. Peter Beagle.

17–19—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. boskone.org.** Sheraton, Boston MA. Ken Macleod.

MARCH 2006

12–13—**P-Con, Yellow Brick Road, 8 Bachelor's Walk Dublin 1, Ireland.** Ashling Hotel. Guest of Honor TBA.

AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $150+.

AUGUST 2007

30–Sep. 3—**Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org.** Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. $160+.

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NEXT ISSUE

JANUARY LEAD STORY

Next issue is our January 2006 issue, the start of another great year of *Asimov's* stories, and to kick things off in high gear and fine fashion, Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award-winner **Michael Swanwick** brings us our lead story for January, "An Episode of Stardust," taking us along on a train ride to Babylon with a full complement of con-artists, fairies, feys, dwarves, ogres, wheeler-dealers, were-foxes, magic-users, and other exotic—and dangerous—passengers. Set in the evocative milieu of his "King Dragon" and "The Word That Sings the Scythe," this one is a lot of fun, so don't miss it!

ALSO IN JANUARY

Popular and prolific British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter** takes us to the front lines for some suspenseful and horrific action during the "Ghost Wars"; **Kim Antieau** returns to these pages after a more than twenty year absence to paint a vivid picture of a sunbaked, drought-stricken county whose salvation may depend on the affectivity of the "Storm Poet"; Hugo-winner **Allen M. Steele** gives us a chilling look at an all-too-possible future world where you just *can't* Get Away From It All, even for a moment, no matter how hard you try, in "World Without End, Amen"; new writer **David D. Levine** returns to invite us to dine at "The Last McDougal's," where some long-simmering family trouble is the least-tasty item on the menu; Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner **Carol Emshwiller** makes her *Asimov's* debut with the tale of a tourist whose vacation lasts one *hell* of a lot longer than anyone ever counted on, as he deals with the "World of No Return"; and new writer **R.R. Angell**, making his own *Asimov's* debut, tells us about all the things that can happen "In the Space of Nine Lives."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes a crack at "Levitating Your Dinner"; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our January 2006 issue on sale at your newsstand on November 15, 2005. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, *www.asimovs.com*).

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new stories by **Robert Silverberg, R. Garcia y Robertson, Wil McCarthy, Liz Williams, Chris Roberson, William Shunn, Paul Melko, Robert Reed, Jack Skillingstead, Bruce McAllister, Paul J. McAuley, Neal Asher, Ruth Nestvold, Kristine Kathryn Rusch** and more!

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